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# Being a Change-Agent in the Context of International Cross-Cultural Community Development Work

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**"Being a change-agent in the context of international cross-cultural  
community development work"**

Nicolette Slagle

## **Introduction: Thailand and the Mission**

In January, 2011, I joined the 123<sup>rd</sup> group of Peace Corps volunteers heading for Thailand, becoming one over 5,000 volunteers who have served in that nation. Thailand is one of the longest continuously running programs in Peace Corps history. Through Peace Corps' relationship with the kingdom, the goals and objectives for the various programs have shifted and changed. I served in one of the last groups under the Community-Based Organizational Development (CBOD) project framework. This program was itself a result of Thailand's 1997 constitution that stressed de-centralization of the government's functions. Volunteers in this program were assigned to a subdistrict administration office (SAO) and instructed to work on a variety of community issues.

### **History of the Peace Corps in Thailand**

Thailand received its first volunteers in January, 1962, making it one of the first countries to participate in the program. The first volunteers worked on projects in secondary and university teaching, work in agriculture and fisheries, primary health care, malaria control, and soil and water conservation.

The community-based organizational development (CBOD) project was established in 2003 and volunteers with the project are assigned to subdistrict administrative offices (SAOs). CBOD volunteers work with their SAO staff and community groups on projects designed to improve local capacity for project design and management. Volunteers also work to share promising practices and resources with other SAOs and community groups

(Peace Corps 2011, 9-10; hereafter PC).

I was group 123, and the current CBOD program ends with group 124. The program is being revamped and changing its focus to Youth Development.

### **My Roles and Responsibilities**

My roles and responsibilities as a CBOD volunteer were:

- *To develop my site by working closely with counterparts and supervisors to learn about the pressing needs and priorities of the community*
- *To identify new resources both in and outside the community and mobilize existing resources to match the needs and priorities*
- *To work closely with the SAO/Tessaban staff to enter the community in a manner that is culturally sensitive and appropriate*
- *To abide by SAO's/Tessaban's policies and practices for office staff and inform relevant staff of my whereabouts*
- *To ask for guidance and assistance for community entry and outreach-including whom to approach and how to approach them.*

The major projects my municipality identified for me to work on related to tourism, occupational groups, and various public health projects. My assignments were to:

1. Increase eco/cultural-tourism
2. Conduct training for occupational groups

3. Work on reducing dengue fever
4. Work on reducing rabies
5. Increase English skills for the community
6. Help promote the nice and clean community competition
7. Help increase AIDs awareness
8. Work with the Thai Massage occupational group
9. Work with the fertilizer occupational group
10. Work to develop the kuram<sup>1</sup> tree project

Peace Corps itself, had its own goals for those in service around the world.

*1.Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.*

*2.Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served.*

*3.Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.*

*The Peace Corps traces its roots and mission to 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan **to serve their country in the cause of peace** by living and working in developing countries. From that inspiration grew an agency of the federal government **devoted to world peace and friendship.** (Peace Corps 2013)*

## **My Background and Key Questions**

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<sup>1</sup> A type of tree native to Thailand.

Becoming a Peace Corps volunteer had been a long-time goal of mine and a culmination of my previous educational and work-related experiences. This paper is a culmination of my Peace Corps service and graduate education. Within this paper, I wish to explore the topic of being a change agent in the context of international cross-cultural community development work. Community development in America has largely been focused around economic development. In contrast, a more contemporary focus has emerged to suggest the need for utilizing networks and circles of influence to enact community change. In a cross-cultural situation, a change-agent merely tries to encourage and support change already occurring. Throughout this paper, I will be responding to the following questions: As an American organization, how does Peace Corps balance change-agency and economic development? How does the historical roles and development of Peace Corps affect its success as a community development organization? Is it even a development organization? How did my personal community development theory affect the community development interventions I undertook? How successful were these interventions? What can be learned about community development from my experiences in Peace Corps, and how will I apply that in future endeavors?

## **Community Development**

### **Community Development in America**

Throughout the history of the profession of community development, the concepts of what a community is, and what a community development worker should do and be, have shifted and expanded. In the early years of the

profession (in the time before it was given a name) "community development" referred mostly to the actual construction of communities. At this point in its history, community development, as a field, was dominated by architects, landscape architects, engineers and others in the design and construction professions. (Legates and Stout 1999) These professionals, focused on the constructed environment, developed theories on how the built environment could improve public health, community pride and civic engagement. This heralded the advent of economic development as an integral part of community development work. Economic development was seen as a way to lift poor communities out of poverty. However, these projects rarely addressed the social/political structures behind the poverty and economic inequality. Additionally, these projects were not designed with the people they were to serve and involved complex bureaucratic interactions that were beyond or confusing for the recipients of the assistance. This focus on economic development led to urban revitalization schemes, which again, did not focus on the root causes of poverty, and often resulted in poor communities of people being forced out of their physical communities. As low-income housing developments began to be constructed, middle-class Caucasian Americans began to move out of the city core and spurred the development of subdivisions. This white-flight and suburban development was further hastened by the flood of veterans returning from World War Two and reaping the benefits of the G.I. bill.

In the 60's and 70's writers and thinkers in America began to define the term "community" differently, shifting the focus to the people behind the term and not just the physical landscape. Concepts such as

social capital, social justice and community integration began to take precedence over blanket "economic improvement". (DeFilippis and Saegart 2007)

Such work has produced an awareness that community development requires compassion, empathy, and most importantly participatory methodologies. These community development practitioners that embrace this ideology tend to refer to their work as community empowerment and their positions as a community advocate or change-agent.

### **Change-agent as a Visionary**

While the term "change-agent" is used both in the business world and the community development field, the definition of the word and role is ill defined and ambiguous. In business terms, a change-agent is someone whose role is to anticipate or perceive changes in the business environment and prepare companies and organizations to respond to them. In community development, a change-agent is often seen as someone that utilizes circles of influence to address socio-economic issues in their communities. Both of these roles require an element of vision on the part of the change-agent. In the context of cross-cultural development, a change agent's role is different. Primarily, a change-agent in cross-cultural context must make sure the vision they are developing for and about the community they are attempting to empower is what the community truly needs and desires. In cross-cultural community work, the most challenging aspect is not



allowing one's own cultural lens to too strongly impact the projects and activities one undertakes.

### **Peace Corps (and AmeriCorps) role as a change-agent incubator**

A percentage of Americans, myself among them, feel that national service is a civic responsibility. For some, their conceptions of what a nation is or should be and what interests that nation has lead them to military service. My commitment to civic responsibility has led me to serve two terms as an AmeriCorps member and a stint as a Peace Corps volunteer. I have served as a member of the AmeriCorps State and Local program, the AmeriCorps \*National Civilian Corps (\*NCCC) (which is an 1990s Clinton initiated re-invention of the Community Civilian Corps from the 1930s), and as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand.

AmeriCorp's flagship program was VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), started in the same era as the Peace Corps. Both programs have their genesis in the Kennedy administration and the ideology of Sargent Shriver.

*"... Be servants of peace ...Work humbly, persistently and intelligently ...Weep with those who are sorrowful ... Care for those who are sick ...Serve your neighbors ... Serve your towns ...Serve the poor ...That is your challenge."*

Shriver 2001

In addition to these programs being alternatives to military service, they both, in varying degrees, strive to instill compassion and empathy in their members.

An important element in the work of the VISTA and Peace Corps programs is intercultural sensitivity. Now, in the twenty-first century, VISTA has grown and morphed in to AmeriCorps, City Year, Teach for America, and has achieved bureaucratic perfection in the Corporation for National and Community Service. The importance of intercultural-sensitivity in each of these organizations is impacted by each organization's missions and goals.

My Experiences: During my service in these various organizations, I have lived and worked in rural communities in Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Oregon and Thailand. I have also lived and worked in more urban communities in California, Louisiana and Mississippi. All of these places have taken me away from my home community, but in each of these places, I have also found a connection to the people there. In most places I have lived and worked in as an AmeriCorps or Peace Corps volunteer, I have been introduced to the community through staged trainings and introductions from my host organizations and/or AmeriCorps/Peace Corps. I have also attempted to augment my own understanding by researching the history, culture and local politics of each place. These introductions and research are important components of functioning as a change-agent.

As an organization, Peace Corps cross-cultural training was the most comprehensive and intensive. Part of this is due to the international dimension of the program, but it was also has due to the stated mission of Peace Corps. The training for the AmeriCorps \*NCCC was a close second, with the AmeriCorps State and Local training the least intensive. Again,

these differences can be traced back to each organizations' stated missions and goals, but also to my own familiarity and comfort with the local community. My AmeriCorps State and Local placement was in a community not far from my own hometown and was with a project I was familiar with from my undergraduate studies. As a Team Leader with the AmeriCorps \*National Civilian Community Corps, I was sent to communities that were close to regions I had visited, or lived in before. However, as an application of the role of change-agent is concerned, the most challenging element of this program was not the local communities I served in, but as a leader of the community of volunteers I served with.

As a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV), I was exposed to a completely new language and culture. The cross-cultural connection that is intrinsic to community advocacy and empowerment was the most challenging and rewarding aspect to the program. In addition to the cross-cultural aspect of Peace Corps work, there is also the additional issue of a completely new political atmosphere to understand. Prior to serving as a PCV, I was quite unfamiliar with the history and politics of Thailand. I was aware that the Kingdom was affected by the 1997 Asian financial crisis and also had some awareness of the 2010 Krung Tep riots, but did not know about the context of these events. I was also vaguely aware that Thailand is in fact, a kingdom. As an American, the concept of a "king" is completely foreign to my political thinking. In no way did any of my research prior to coming to Thailand prepare me for the visceral experience of living within the Kingdom.

## **A short history of Thai Community Development**

Before colonialism came to Southeast Asia and Thailand, Buddhist kings ruled over large tracts of land, which also included smaller tribes of animists whom mostly lived in the borderlands of kingdoms and practiced shifting cultivation. The kings and other local leaders could be seen to have possessed circles of influence, which overlapped in areas. The major kingdoms of the area included those of current day Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Malaysia. When the Europeans first started appearing in the 1700s, each major kingdom took a different approach when dealing with them. Thailand always took a diplomatic approach, and through enlightened acts of diplomacy, Thailand maintained its independence. However, some have argued (Sivaraksa 1990, Winichakul 1994) that through interactions with the Europeans, Thais "colonized" themselves, and other peoples living within Thailand's boundaries<sup>2</sup>. Most clearly demonstrated by (and for the purposes of this paper) by the shift of the area known as Isaan from a part of the Kingdom of Laos to the Kingdom of Thailand<sup>3</sup>. Of all those Buddhist kingdoms of pre-colonial SE Asia, Thailand is the last remaining one, the neighboring kingdoms being supplanted by European

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2 This idea of "internal colonization" is important to my understanding of Thais, Thailand, and Isaan. Basically the theory is that once the king (of Siam) had decided to adopt Western modes of government and thinking, the population within Thailand's borders was forced to do the same. In the case of Isaan, this meant destroying any loyalties to the Lao king and any perception of "Laos-ness".

3 Prior to westerners' arrival, the various kingdoms had no real set boundaries, and primarily relied on natural features to determine the edge of their kingdoms. These edges were porous, with people moving back and forth through them, and in some cases, living within them. These people had an allegiance to one kingdom or the other, both, or neither. Additionally, in the case of Laos and Lana (now Northern Thailand), the kings paid tribute to the King of Siam. When Britain and France started to demarcate the edges of their claimed land, the King of Siam realized he needed to do the same. In many cases, the King claimed borderlands as his own, and where he could, actual land from the other kingdoms. While this may be understood as a good thing, as the land at least remained sovereign territory, when compared to Laos or Burma, Thailand is vastly more westernized.

powers, and/or having come under the dominance of Communist parties. While Buddhism still exists in these new nations, it is no longer part of the state institution, having been, in many cases, criminalized by the ruling communist party. In short, Thailand survived western colonization by adapting western models of government rather than fighting the change that came with western imperialism.

When we look at this in terms of community development, we see that primarily, community development interventions were designed to establish a sense of "Thainess" in Thai communities. This establishment of a national Thai identity was first used to create the nation of Thailand. It is now being used to ensure loyalty to the King (and royal family). In fact, one of the main activities of the local governments in Thailand is the sponsoring, and hosting, of various cultural events that are important to the Thai national identity.

### **America in Thailand**

*"This kingdom was know as Siam until 1939, when it was changed to Thailand. Then it reverted to the original name in 1949. Two years after the coup d'etat of 1947 it was decreed that the country would be called Thailand, and it remains so officially. Ironically the kingdom has since been ruled by one dictator after another with very brief liberal democratic intervals. The name, Thailand, signified the crisis of traditional Siamese Buddhist values. Removing from the nation the name it has carried all its life is in fact the first step in the psychic dehumanization of its citizens, especially when its original name is replaced by a hybrid, Anglicized word. This new name also implies chauvinism and irredentism."*

-Sivaraksa 1990

Thailand has always had a mutually beneficial relationship with western superpowers. Its relationship with America is no different. After WWII when American hegemony, in the form of capitalism, began to battle "the Red Threat" of communism, Thailand opened herself up to American military colonialism. In exchange for military training and equipment, Thailand allowed the United States to build several military bases. In addition to the bases, several official "rest and relaxation" locations were designated within the kingdom. These areas are now notoriously sex-tourism hot spots. As Thailand became an area of strategic military importance, the American government began to take a heavy-handed interest in the politics of the kingdom. Realizing the Thai love of their king was an important tool for controlling Thai public opinion, the United States funded a program to distribute photos of the king around the country. At the same time the government was sponsoring this program, they were also supporting the military dictatorship (Sivaraksa 1990, 150). It is no wonder (to me) why Thailand was one of the first countries to receive PCVs. As Peace Corps was set up to battle the red-tide of communism, Thailand was a logical place to send volunteers. Thailand had not turned communist, and America wanted it to stay that way.

### **Economic and Political Inequality in Thailand**

Isaan is the region I served in, and is the poorest and most populous region in Thailand. Back during the red tide of the 1950s-60s, had been the hot-bed of communist activity in Thailand. Its still "red country" and the present political turmoil over the current Prime Minister (Yingluck Shinawatra) and a former Prime Minister (Thaksin Shinawatra) is related to

their standing as "red" candidates. While Thaksin was a former member of the Thai communist party, his policy changes and development schemes have only made it easy for large swaths of Isaan to join the capitalistic economic system and accumulate large amounts of debt. Thaksin and his party (Pheu Thai) have supporters, known as the "red shirts" that threaten and undertake activist activities in response to various political manoeuvrings by the Democratic Party. The democratic party, in turn, have supporters known as "yellow shirts" that also threaten and undertake activist activities. Since the 2010 red shirts riots in Krung Tep, a major topic of conversation in the Thailand government has been the idea of *reconciliation*. This reconciliation has been aimed at healing the political divide that has been growing between the poor, undereducated rural Thai communities and the wealthier, educated urban Thai communities. Isaan is known as one of the red shirt's strongholds, and my community is no exception. I know villagers who attended the 2010 riots, and have seen red shirt rallies in my local *sala*. The yellow-shirts, for their part, tend to be from urban areas (mostly Krung Tep). In talking with some of my Thai friends and colleges about Thaksin and the red shirts, I learned that many of them support him and his party because they feel that no political candidate has ever taken an interest in their concerns. I was told that Thaksin cares about poor people, and wants to help them.

Because of the dynamics of the Thai economy (with Krung Tep and other large cities being the center of commerce), many members of the younger generations leave their villages to find work there. This creates a generational gap where the village populations consist mostly of the older

generations living there raising the children of the middle generations that have left to find work in the cities. These middle generation members then bring money and ideas back from the cities which then make the youth also want to leave to find better jobs. Many times, the villagers that leave to move to cities send money back to their parents. This creates a type of feedback loop where one family's wealth increases and therefore, other families want to seek the same fortunes.

Meanwhile, Thailand's traditionally strongest economic sector, agriculture, has been declining under lack of leadership and convoluted development schemes of the national government (Finch, 2012). While these schemes have been an attempt to economically develop the farming communities of Thailand, they have applied a purely capitalistic development framework to their initiatives (i.e. increasing mechanization, increasing chemical inputs to result in higher yields). The result is an increasing debt for the farming communities, and a declining competitive edge in the global agricultural economy. While countries in Europe and the Americas are moving towards organic agricultural production, Thailand continues to use a vast amount of chemicals in their production. While this has resulted in larger yields for the farmers, they are losing international markets that do not want vegetables (and rice) produced with so many chemicals. Thailand also has an extremely high rate of cancer, second only to the United States, but with the worldwide highest death rate.

Thailand has also traditionally allocated a large portion of government spending on infrastructure development which is leading to a more connected



culture, which has the potential to help spread the circles of influence of existing change-agents in Thailand. The identification and relationship development with these various change-agents has been a large part of my Peace Corps experience.

### **Sexual Inequality in Thailand**

In Thai culture, it is common for male children to join a watt (Buddhist temple) and become a monk for a period of time to make merit for their mothers to pay off their "birth debt"<sup>4</sup>. (Females cannot make merit for themselves. Nor can they become monks.) As women cannot join a watt to pay off this debt, they turn to other means. This mostly takes the form of financially supporting their parents as they transition into old-age. Moreover, in Isaan (and other regions), women who cannot find legal means to make money turn to prostitution. Thailand's economy has also long relied on sex-workers and the sex-industry. A lot of those service providers also come out of the Isaan region. In years past, the Thai government has directly supported the sex-industry and sex-tourism.

*"In 1980, the then Deputy-Prime Minister made a speech at a conference of provincial governors in Thailand in which he said that in order to increase tourism the governors should promote sexual-oriented entertainment in their provinces."*

*(Boonchalaksi and Guest, pg 25)*

### **Circles of Influence in Thailand**

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<sup>4</sup> "Birth debt" is a debt owed by Thai children to their parents.

Within Thai culture, there are several different levels of leadership that each have different circles of influence over Thai citizens. The position with the highest level of influence is the King. In Isaan, there was a time that the King of Laos also held influence over the area. However, during the 1950s and 60s when the communists took over Laos, the Laotian royal family was put in captivity and eventually died there. On the village level, the position with the biggest circle of influence is the Nayoke (similar to a Mayor), followed by the Balat (similar to a city manager) (although the Balat can be seen to exert more influence as their terms of service are longer than the Nayoke's). Below the Nayoke and Balat are the Tessaban<sup>5</sup> council members, followed by the individual village headmen. My villages were then further divided into communities, which each had their own community leader. Above the Tessaban (or SAO) is the Amphur (district) government, followed by the Jangwat (Provincial) and national governments. The Sangha (Buddhist community) also exerts influence over Thai communities.

Thailand is a member of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and has been for years, however in 2015, ASEAN is planning on instigating a common market and monetary unit similar to the Euro. ASEAN has chosen English as its operating language, and as a result of this there has been a large push to start speaking English in the government offices and teaching English in the schools. A big concern is that the other countries in ASEAN have better English skills than in Thailand. This has led to an institution

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5 While a Tessaban is essentially the same as a SAO, the area it covers must reach a population and tax-base threshold before being designated a "Tessaban". The Tessaban I worked at covered areas that had previously been part of two separate SAOs. As a result, the Tessaban still worked closely with these SAOs.

of "English Mondays"<sup>6</sup> at government organizations. ASEAN can also be understood to exert influence over Thai communities.

## **My Site and Projects**

### **Tessaban Overview**

In Thailand, there are two sizes of local government offices, a sub-district administrative office (SAO) and municipal office (Tessaban). A Tessaban usually has a larger population and a higher tax base. My Tessaban has a population of just over 6,000 people and includes 6 villages, which are sub-divided into 18 communities. It is common for a governmental office to include several villages, but less common for the villages to be further divided into smaller communities. Two of the villages, Nong Noi and Thong Mon, are separate from each other and the larger community. (My town also has a pond and Nong Noi and Thong Mon are on the other side of the pond) The remaining four villages are much closer together and are not visually distinct communities. Each village has a head man (Pu-yai ban) and an assistant headman (Pu-chuai ban). Each community also has a community leader and a group of community volunteers. Each village and community has an established community gathering spot. My Tessaban is rather large as compared to other volunteer's offices, and several different departments. These include the administrative office,

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6 "English Mondays" is a national campaign designed to help increase the oral English skills of government workers. The way the program is supposed to work is that on Mondays, all government offices will communicate using English. Unfortunately, most workers in these offices have little to no oral English skills, so the program is a bit hard to implement.

the accounting office, the health and environment department, the education department, the engineering department, and the public works department. The Tessaban also runs the emergency response program (including training the village security volunteers). Several of the departments shared projects and responsibilities for the running of the district. The Tessaban also coordinated many projects and events with the district government and other local governmental organizations (such as the schools and hospital). My Tessaban has daily garbage collection (rather rare for Thailand) and even runs a weekly recycling program. The department I worked with the most was the education department. This department is responsible for community development and is where the community development officer works.

Tessaban Projects My Tessaban had ten different projects laid out for me to work on when I arrived at site. Many of these projects were designed as local responses to national priorities. Generally, the Tessaban would lay out project options, then hold community meetings where community members voted on which elements of the projects they wanted. Each of these different projects had a department within the Tessaban that over saw the project and different groups of community members that were involved in the projects. I spent my first months at site learning about the various projects, departments and community groups. As follows is an overview of the projects, the departments involved with them and associated community groups and leaders.

## 1. Increase eco-tourism

This project was one of the newer projects in the Tessaban and did not have a specified staff member to work on it. Rather, I was told it was the responsibility of the entire administrations office. As this project did not have a designated staff person, there had not been much done on the project prior to my arrival. When I arrived, they gave me some general ideas of local attractions, and wanted me to work from there. There was not an organized group of community leaders working on this project either.

Tourism has always been a major element in the Thai economy, and in recent years, there has been a marked shift towards promoting eco, and community based tourism. My town's main attraction, as far as environmental features, was the large pond in the town that had been built as one of the King's projects. The pond was the town's main source of water, and was used by residents as a fishing spot and a place to take their water buffalos. During the summer months, vendors would set up stalls and sell food, and paddle boats and inner tubes were available for rent.

As far as culture goes, Isaan is one of the least visited regions in Thailand and could provide tourists an experience they could not get elsewhere. Isaan is also known for its silk, and its distinct cuisine. My town had both silk and cotton weaving, and any number of good cooks.

## 2. Conduct training for occupational groups

The occupational groups in my Tessaban consisted of the weaving group, the massage therapy group and the organic fertilizer group. These groups were overseen by the Community Development Officer and each group had a different leader. As I will cover the massage and fertilizer groups later, I will not cover them here.

The leader of the weaving group, Paa You-i, was also a local community leader. Most of the members of the weaving group were older members of the community. They wove both silk and cotton fabrics. Both were hand-spun and hand dyed. Weaving activities were mostly done when it was not rice season. While they wanted me to help promote their fabrics, I did not actually see a capacity to increase production. Therefore, I began to explore ideas of how to increase their capacity.

The occupational group program was something that was spearheaded by Thaksin in his home province of Chiang Mai. During his time as Prime Minister, the occupational group idea became the "OTOP" program (One Tambon, One Product) which stressed the development of cottage industry development as a tool for economic development. The OTOP program also included a certification and ranking system.

## 3. Work on reducing dengue fever

Since malaria has been eradicated in Thailand, Dengue fever was the

primary mosquito-borne illness of concern in the country. This project was overseen by the Health and Environment Department in collaboration with the Village health volunteers and the local hospital. The main form of mosquito control that was practiced in town was the use of pesticides at the beginning of the season. Village Health volunteers were also taught about other prevention methods such as reducing standing water and the use of fish to reduce the breeding populations of mosquitos<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. Work on reducing rabies

Feral dogs were a major problem in many communities in Thailand, and along with that, came a risk of rabies. This project was also overseen by the Health and Environment Department. As I was learning about the various projects, I asked several questions about rabies and stray dogs in the community. To my surprise, I was told there were no stray dogs and no cases of rabies in the community.

#### 5. Increase English skills for community

This project had very vague instructions associated with it, but basically I was to work with the schools and the other local organizations to increase English proficiency in the community. As discussed above, with the impending development of a unified ASEAN economy, Thailand's command of the English language (or lack there of) was a major national issue. While all students in my community had

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<sup>7</sup> The fish would eat the larvae.

been taught English since starting school, very few members of the community could speak English with any proficiency. Major reasons for this included the limited skills of many of the English teachers and the lack of opportunities to practice English. As a white person, and a native English speaker, I was often seen as a source of free English learning and received countless requests from community members and organizations to teach English. This was a project I often struggled with as a) I did not join Peace Corps to teach English and b) while not specifically prohibited from teaching English as a CBOD volunteer, we were not encouraged to make that our main project.

6. Help promote the "Nice and Clean Community" competition

The "Nice and Clean Community" competition was an annual competition held by my Tessaban around the Thai New Year, Song Kran. This again, was a project of the Health and Environment Department. When I was familiarizing myself with this project, I was very much unclear as to what assistance I could be as they claimed all the villages already participated in the project. As a result, I mostly just helped out the village I lived in get ready for the competition each year.

7. Help increase AIDs awareness

AIDs is a major disease of concern in Thailand, and as such many communities have programs designed to address the issue. Many communities also have a PLHIV (people living with HIV) group that meet at the local health station or hospital. My community's initiatives



included an annual event held each Valentine's day which brought together community members and school children in a morning run followed by an educational program on HIV/AIDs. This project was overseen by the Health and Environment Department in collaboration with the local hospital.

8. Work with the Thai Massage occupational group

As covered early, the occupational groups were overseen by the community development officer. As part of my orientation activities, I was introduced to the leader of the Thai massage group. This group was started to not only increase community members' secondary income, but also to increase the health and well-being of community members. The Thai massage that they group was being taught was therapeutic massage to help with aches and pains. I was told by the leader of the group and the community development officer that the Tessaban had sponsored the training program for the group (in conjunction with the hospital) but the group was having a major cohesion problem as most members immediately left the town to seek higher wages in areas with more tourists.

9. Work with the fertilizer occupational group

The fertilizer occupational group was developed to help farmers shift from chemical fertilizers to organic fertilizers. I was told when I started that there was one community that was serving as the test site for the project, but that they planned on expanding the program to

each of the six villages. During my orientation, I was shown the area that was used by one village for their fertilizer production, but try as I might, I could never find a community member that was involved in the project. Or indeed, even had knowledge of the project. Again, this seemed to be due to the style of project development that the Tessaban employed.

#### 10. Work to develop the kuram tree project

At first, I could not determine what a kuram tree was, or what it was used for, but eventually determined that it was the tree that was used by the weaving group to produce their traditional indigo dye. Once identified, I still had a very difficult time figuring out what the actual status of the project was and what help they needed in developing it.

Wanting to be sure that I understood both the local, national and global context of each of the projects, I set about researching them the best I could. I met both the government employees and local leaders involved in all the projects. I researched other national occupational groups and the genesis of the concept of the OTOP projects. I began to study the history and status of tourism in Thailand, and subsequently, prostitution as well. I attended and participated in events related to the health projects and got to know the hospital employees and local health volunteers involved in the projects. I spent time learning how the local organizations interacted to manage projects. I also spent time at the various offices to build

relationships with the organizations.

After spending time getting to learn my community, my Tessaban and Tessaban staff and other local organizations, I began to try to develop action plans for the projects that I thought I could have the most impact on. My first step was to develop a list of questions I needed answered about each of the different projects to which I was assigned. Some of these questions I asked of the Tessaban staff, some I asked of community leaders. The Health and Environment department gave me the most comprehensive answers to my questions, followed by the leaders of the massage group and the weaving group. Unfortunately, I never really got very clear answers from my appointed counterpart (the community development officer).

It was clear to me that I was not going to have much impact on projects such as the rabies project or the "Nice and Clean Community" competition projects. Additionally, the singular lack of any actual sort of functioning Thai Massage "group" made it very unlikely that I would have any success with that project either. While I was very interested in the goals of the fertilizer group, and spent some time researching additional fertilizer recipes for the group, my inability to track down any leaders of the group greatly limited the impact I was able to have on that project.

Given that I had basically out-right eliminated three of the ten projects my Tessaban had outlined for me (and found little to no traction on a fourth) I began to focus my attentions on the weaving group and the tourism

project. I felt that working with this group and on this initiative would in fact address many of the projects they wanted me to work on, while providing support for a project that had little staff support.

Tourism: My community consistently expressed a desire to have more people come and visit the town. I began to focus on how various aspects of the community could be developed to attract tourists. Given that the vast majority of tourist in Thailand never visited or even heard about Isaan, I knew attracting foreign tourists would be a large undertaking. As such, I also developed ideas of how to attract Thai tourists and locally-based foreigners (i.e. English teachers in nearby towns and other ex-pats). Top among my suggestions for increasing the number of Thai nationals visiting the town was developing the local market (Thais love to shop), promoting their local watts, and local initiatives (Thai government employees routinely visit other government offices to learn about the initiatives they have). As far as attracting locally-based foreigners, I suggested that they further develop the area around the lake, installing stands that could be used year round, promoting their various festivities throughout the year, and providing bird-watching tours. While I never did receive a direct indication that they liked my ideas during my time there; permanent stands were built by the pond, as well as a more permanent stage and area for parties, a weekly Monday market was hosted along the pond, and several construction projects were initiated at the local watts.

My ideas for attracting foreign-based tourists were more complex and far-sighted. Knowing that the town could never compete with the rest of

Thailand in terms of scenic beauty, I focused more on culture-based tourism. My town has several things going for it in terms of culture-based tourism.

- 1) Not far from my town is Ban Chiang, one of the oldest archeological sites in Southeast Asia
- 2) In addition to the pond being a project of the King, there was a nearby museum that was one of the many centers developed by the Queen
- 3) My town had a number of different festivals and community parties throughout the year. They were also very welcoming to foreigners (most Thai communities enjoy a good party and are very welcoming to foreigners, but based on stories I heard from other volunteers, I felt my town was especially welcoming and friendly)
- 4) My town was not far from the Laos border and could be used as a stop on a trip between Thailand and Laos.
- 5) While my town was rural and still had a lot of traditional elements to it, it was still fairly developed and would not be very difficult for travelers to get to.
- 6) Many members of the community knew traditional weaving methods.
- 7) Isaan food is quite different from Central Thai food, there were a number of good cooks in my town. During the Song Kran festivities, there was a special focus on local dishes.

As I developed my tourism plan, I envisioned tourism based around home

stays, weaving lessons, bird-watching, woofing (willing workers on organic farms) and culinary lessons. The major feature I wanted to develop to spurn the growth of both the weaving-based economy and the tourism-based economy was the development of locally crafted hand-woven bamboo fabric. I spent a good amount of time meeting and interacting with the local weavers (whom were most of the older community members), learning about the current techniques they were using and where they got their supplies from. I eventually learned that the weaving group had previously worked with one of the local schools to teach the children weaving skills. This project had also received UNESCO support, but after talking with the teachers at the school, I learned that the project had run out of money and had been stopped. There were several hurdles I faced in the implementation of this project. These included researching the production process of naturally spun, bamboo linen, finding community partners and Tessaban support.

Bamboo Fabric: Very early on, I had the idea of trying to promote bamboo fabric as an additional offering of the weaving group. As Thai fabric already has an international market and the popularity of both sustainable tourism and natural fabrics is increasing, locally produced natural fibers and products would enhance existing social structures and existing projects. Furthermore, there is a small textile factory in town that makes sports clothes<sup>8</sup>. As I began to research bamboo fabric, I learned that most fabric is currently being produced in China. I also learned that current production methods heavily rely on chemical processing, which destroys many

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<sup>8</sup> Bamboo fabric is popular for sportswear as it has natural sweat-wicking and antibacterial properties.

of the bamboo's natural properties. This made me even more convinced that producing a naturally processed bamboo fabric would be a boon for my community. Moreover, I also felt this would be an attraction for tourists, as weaving lessons were an important part of my tourism plan. The problem I then began to have was actually figuring out how bamboo fabric could be naturally processed. When I tried to talk to the weaving group and my counterpart about the idea, they said they had never heard of bamboo fabric.

As I was researching the existing condition of the weaving program in my town, I had finally begun to locate other resources available for such a project. I learned that there was not only design services available to occupational groups, but that there were various Thai organizations that were working to promote the development of natural fiber production in Thailand. I had meetings arranged and got to know various professionals that were working on developing natural dyeing methods, natural fiber production methods and markets as well as getting to know more about the design services available to occupational groups. I began to plan out how a natural fabric project could be implemented in stages, starting with production of the raw materials, moving into fabric production from fiber produced in Bangkok, and finally into full-cycle local production. I felt this project could also involve the schools that had occupational groups, ensuring generational continuity of the project. What's more, I felt that by promoting the project as a tourist attraction, the younger generations of the community would see weaving as something "cool". However, by this time, I was nearly at the end of my two years of service.

## Education

Through the years of increasing modernization and integration of Thailand into the global economy, the Thai education system has also had to change. While it is not uncommon for older members of the community to have only achieved a very elementary level of education, the younger generations now routinely attend higher education institutions. Many of the government employees will also work towards bachelor (or even master) degrees as part of their employment. The Thai education system has also been a major force in the development of a national "Thai" identity, with lessons focused on Thai history, culture and religion. These lessons do not train students to look at Thai history or culture critically, but rather to memorize important elements of both. The same can be said about the religious instruction. The result is that students can recite Buddhist prayers, but have little comprehension of what they are actually saying. This rote memorization focused teaching is practiced across the board, which also results in students being able to speak English "catch-phrases" again without actually understanding what they are saying<sup>9</sup>. This lack of critical thinking skills seems extremely baffling in the context of a Buddhist culture, considering Buddhism is supposed to be about critically examining the world around you. However, given the context of somewhat oppressive monarchy combined with a traditionally militaristic "democratic" government, it makes a bit more sense. While there are those within Thai

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9 One of the best examples of this is the greeting students are taught to say to their English speaking teachers: "Good morning, teacher. How are you?" To which the teacher is expected to respond: "I am fine, and you?" To which the students usually respond: "I am fine, and you?".



society that recognize the limitations and issues with the Thai education system, there are few that addressing the issue in any sort of meaningful manner save Mechai Viravaidya and his Mechai Pattana School (more on this later).

In addition to my focus on the weaving/tourism project, I began to spend more time consistently going to the local schools and non-formal education office. My aim was two-fold; 1) to further develop my relationship with those organizations, teachers and students and 2) learn if there were others ways I could contribute to the schools other than just teaching English.

My town has three elementary schools, one high-school, one kindergarten and one non-formal education office. The three elementary schools serve each of the main villages, and the high-school was for students throughout the district. The non-formal education office was for older learners and students that had not completed their high school education.

Aunuban Tessaban: This kindergarten is run by the Tessaban, and was one of the first places I started going to. This school was supposedly open to any community member, but for the most part, it was Tessaban staff and their families that had children there. While I was there, I was able to meet the principal, who told me the school was unique because it has male teachers. He quit soon after I started, and for most of the rest of my service, the school did not have a principal. At first, they had asked me

to just hang out with the students, during play time and lunch time, so they could get familiar with me. Eventually, I was asked by some teachers to help them teach English and several times was given a classroom full of students that had no teacher. At first, I spent a lot of time at this school, as it in the same location as the office of the community development officer. After the children got familiar with me, they got too familiar with me and my presence became a distraction and began to limit my time at the school to only Friday mornings. On the mornings I came to the school, I would mostly teach the children English songs and help the teachers with any English lessons they already had planned.

Aunuban Charoensin: This was the school that serves the village I lived in, and has the largest number of students and teachers. There were two different English teachers at the school, one of whom could speak English fairly well, and one that had little to no English skills. Kruu Noi was the primary English teacher and the one I spent most of my time working with. Early on in my service, she had asked me if I could come and teach English at her school. While I was hesitant to get pegged as an English teacher, I agreed. She then came up with a schedule that had me teaching several days a week at her school, for the entire school day. I explained to her and my supervisor that I could not dedicate that much time to her school because a) my primary responsibilities were not teaching English and b) it would not be fair to the other schools if I spent all my time at one school. When I would go to this school, I spent my time helping her with her English lessons, and helping the children with their homework. As this school was also the school that received funding as the English Resource

Center, there were periodic English camps that were put on at the school for the other elementary schools in the district. When there were these events, I would come and help teach English, sing songs and play games with the students.

Nong Thung Mon Wittaya This school serves one of the smaller villages, and from all indications was the poorest of the three schools. The English teacher at this school was an older teacher and had very poor English skills. This school also had several income generation projects for the students. Among these projects was one for making handicrafts out of recycled objects, a reed mat weaving project, and a garden project. All of these projects were overseen by two teachers, but were mostly run by the students. This school also had a dance group that won several local competitions and continued on to a regional competition. This was the school that I hoped to work with on the weaving/tourism project, as the school had a strong student leadership and previously had a weaving project. Additionally as the school had a garden that was maintained by the students, I felt like there was an opportunity there for the students to grow plants that could be used to produce the natural dyes. At this school, I was often asked by the children to read to them, so it became customary for me to come and spend the afternoon there in the library. While I was there, I would read some English stories to the children, and sometimes they would help me read the Thai stories. I realized this school did not have a very extensive library, and began to utilize in country resources to get more books for the school. In addition to several organizations that provided English language books for schools, I reached

out to a Thai relative that helped me secure some bilingual books for this school. I was also able to get the bilingual books for other schools in my area and passed on the organization's information to other PCVs.

Rong Rein Nong Noi: Nong Noi is the smallest village in my area, and the elementary school is likewise the smallest school. The English teacher at the school had fairly good English skills, but did not seem as dedicated to teaching as the teacher at Aunuban Charoensin. At this school, I spent time working with the English teacher on different English lessons and helped the students with their homework. For a time, I also tried to work in my "If the World Were a Village" lessons (I will cover these more later).

Charoen Sook Sa: This is the local high-school, which has students from the entire district. As result, some of the students knew who I was, from seeing me around town, and some were complete strangers to me. As the principal there had asked me primarily to come and teach about America, I also tried to do my "If the World Were a Village" lessons there. This school also has two English teachers, one that speaks adequate English and one that has little to no English skills. Eventually, this school hired another American to come and teach English every day at the school; and he was joined by his Chinese wife. After they started, I did not have any classes to teach, and instead, most days helped the Chinese teacher with her lessons. As she could not speak Thai and the students could not speak English or Chinese, she was having a particularly hard time with her lessons. I was able to help her translate her Chinese grammar lessons

into Thai, so the students could gain some comprehension.

Charoensin Non-Formal Education Office: I initially started going to this office to learn more about the training programs they had, and if there was any way I could assist with projects they had already started, or wished to start. As with most places, they were mainly interested in having me teach English. They had two different village-level offices and wanted me to start doing English lessons there for adults in the villages. Again, while I did not want to get pegged as an English teacher, I agreed and told them I could do the lessons. Unfortunately, try as I might, I could never get them to agree on a time for me to have the lessons. As a result, most of the work I did with the Non-Formal Education Office consisted of helping conduct English Camps for the adult learners.

If the World Were a Village: Since I continually got requests for English lessons and wanted to incorporate some cultural exchange as well, I decided to develop lessons based off the children's book "If the World Were a Village". This book was based on the premise that if the world were distilled down to a village of 100 people, what would the ratio of ethnicities and languages spoken and other demographic information be. I felt this was a good way to impart some English skills and cultural understanding as well.

To conduct the lessons, I bought a copy of the DVD of the animated book, and would play it for the children (one chapter at a time) with the

subtitles on. Then we would go through and translate each chapter together. Depending on the level of the students, I would either translate each word, or try to have students translate some words based on context. Since there was also geographic and demographic information, I would also include lessons about where countries are and other relevant information. I felt that this method would help increase reading skills, reading comprehension skills and increase culture understanding. As I also relied on the students to help me translate the chapters, I felt that it was helping them with their confidence in reading and speaking English. I tried these lessons at a couple of the different schools, but they didn't last long. Classes often got canceled for other cultural events and often times, classes I had been working with would suddenly have their schedules changed and I wouldn't have students to work with. At one school I tried the lessons at (Aunuban Charoensin), the teacher wanted to borrow the video so she could watch it first, but then did not return it for several months.

This problem, of classes being canceled, or moved around was a common one for many volunteers. The Thai school year included many holidays and various special events which required weeks of preparations, which were often done solely by the students. Additionally, there were often school reviews and end of term tests which also took several weeks preparation to pay off their "birth debt"<sup>10</sup>. The testing was conducted in large groups with the teachers basically giving the students the answers. When it came time for those tests, they often wanted me to come and help with the English portions of them. All in all, working with the schools and the

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<sup>10</sup> "Birth debt" is a debt owed by Thai children to their parents.

Thai teachers led to a lot of frustrations. Often time teachers would not show up, or were busy getting ready for various activities that celebrated the great work they were doing. While I enjoyed spending time with the students, it was very difficult to feel like I was actually accomplishing anything.

## **Local Agenda 21**

Shortly after the start of my second year at site, I was informed that my Tessaban was committing to implementing parts of the Local Agenda 21 (LA 21). LA 21 is the local government form of Agenda 21, the UN Sustainability Initiative. As part of this agenda, the town was looking at ways to reduce waste, decrease energy usage and improve the local environment. To that end, I helped research recycling options for the community and similar initiatives other communities undertook. I attended various training programs with the Tessaban staff and community volunteers. I was very excited about this project, as I have a background in sustainability, and sustainability education. One of the major projects they were undertaking and wanted my help with was a Zero-waste project. As the town already had a trash collection program (very rare for Thai communities) and a recycling collection program (even more rare), I felt that instituting a composting program would be the next logical step. I also suggested that a waste-audit be conducted, so they could get a better idea of what being collected with the trash. To help start the composting program, we visited a nearby town's "sustainable technologies" demonstration site and learned about various composting methods that are used in Thailand. Then the village volunteers were given the materials to

start their own composting projects, so they could serve as models for other residents. While I felt this was a good start, I also pushed for a centralized composting site that would be overseen by the Tessaban staff and would also be used for composting leaf litter. (The volunteer's composting systems were mostly for food waste. Leaf litter and other plant trimmings were routinely burned by both community members and the Tessaban)

### **Rong Paa-yaa-baan Charoensin**

Rong Paa-yaa-baan is the Thai word for "hospital". Because my town was also the location of the district government offices, there was a hospital in town. Most other SAOs and Tessabans only had "health stations". These health stations are the place that community members go for simple health services and are also the organization responsible for the training of the village health volunteers. As my Tessaban had asked me to assist in a number of health-related projects, I thought it was in my best interest to get to know the hospital, its staff and various community projects. I ended up spending quite a bit of time with the hospital staff in charge of the village health volunteer program, and attending different trainings they hosted. While I didn't have much background in healthcare, I did eventually find a niche within the hospital's programming, which was becoming part of their puu-soon-ayut<sup>11</sup> program.

### **Goals two and three**

Up to this point, I have mostly been describing my work towards Peace Corps

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<sup>11</sup> Puu-soon-ayut is a Thai word that means "elder". I will talk more about this program later.



goal 1 (*Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women*). However, goals 2 and 3 (*Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served. Helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.*), are also important elements of the Peace Corps mission<sup>12</sup>. To me, one of the greatest elements of the Peace Corps is the cultural immersion element of it. Very few international programs out there allow Americans to live and work so intimately in a foreign culture. Even someone that spends two years teaching English in Japan, Korea, China, etc will not have the same cultural experience as someone in Peace Corps. The reasons for this are simple. While in Peace Corps, you are taught your host country's language. You are, for the most part, placed in rural communities that may not have ever met very many (if any) other Americans. Additionally, your coworkers are all nationals of your host country. Because of all these elements, you leave Peace Corps with a much better understanding of your host country than someone that spent the same amount of time there as a volunteer, ex-pat or tourist. As far as my experience in Peace Corps is concerned, one of my major motivations behind joining Peace Corps (other than my commitment to national service) was the desire to get to know another culture at a level not available to everyone. To that end, I really could not have asked for a better assignment than Peace Corps Thailand.

As such a popular tourist spot and having a somewhat notorious reputation

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<sup>12</sup>I will argue later that goals 2 and 3 are actually the most important goals as they relate to the stated mission of Peace Corps and the historical motivation for the development of the program.

as far as its red-light districts go, Thailand may be one of the most visited and most misunderstood Southeast Asian countries. Most of the other foreigners I met while in Thailand had no idea where Isaan was. When I told people I was living in Northeastern Thailand, they would say "oh, by Chiang Mai?".

Another thing that was highly stressed during training, was the importance of relationships in Thai culture. This extends to not only the language and how you greet people, but the process by which projects get accomplished in Thailand. To that end, Peace Corps stressed that we needed to spend a lot of time in our community, building relationships that would not only allow us to become integrated, but help us accomplish our goals.

Puu-soon-ayuts: As I mentioned above, one of the niches I found within the hospitals programing and the community at large, was becoming part of the puu-soon-ayuts program. The Tessaban and other organizations did a lot for the elder members of the community, including distributing monthly stipends, hosting various events and working to get the younger generations to spend more time with them. One of the elements of this program included a traditional dance troupe that I became part of. This group would perform before various cultural events and on days of merit making. By the end of my service, I was a full-fledged member of the group, with my own set of costumes to wear. The members of the group enjoyed my company, and often made sure I attended other events for the elders in the community. As I spent a lot of time with both the elders of the community and the young

children, I realized there was a big disconnect between the generations. While most of the elders were raising their grandchildren, both the kids and the elders seemed wary of and afraid of the teenagers in town. When they told me I should be afraid of the teenagers that ride their motorcycles around fast and drink in the park, they were expressing their own fears in a very Thai, indirect manner. It wasn't until I had been in the community for nearly two years and had experienced a number of fights at parties that people began to directly express their concerns surrounding youth in the village. Beyond just the fear that surrounds the behavior of the youth, there seemed to be a general concern for the slow erosion of traditional knowledge that wasn't getting passed to the younger generations. Among that knowledge was the skill of weaving. While many members of the older generation wove silk, cotton and reed mats, very few members of the younger generations participated in the activities. I was told that younger generations had no interest in learning weaving because it was hard work. Also that younger generations didn't want to wear clothing made out of traditional fabrics because they wanted jeans.

Wat-ta-na-tam Thai:<sup>13</sup> As I mentioned in the section about Thai education, special events are very important to Thai culture. It was not uncommon for there to be at least one parade, party, or other celebration each month in my town. Many of these events were sponsored or coordinated by the Tessaban. Some of these events, I would attend as a member of the Tessaban, helping with refreshments or other duties, but more often than not, I would be grabbed by a community member (usually one of my puu-soon-

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<sup>13</sup> Thai culture.

ayut friends) to take part in the festivities. I was told by many of my friends that my involvement in these activities was part of the reason my community loved me so much. I was told that when the other farang (white person, or foreigner) in town attended these events, they usually stayed off to the side line and did not participate as whole-heartily as I did. On top of this, I also made sure that I was involved in any merit-making activities in the town, as I knew how important it was to my villagers.

Korn: One of the first people I met in town was Korn. Korn was a katooney<sup>14</sup> and worked at the Public Health Office. He was well known in the community and very much involved in many of the activities around town. His mother was a member of the dance troupe that I eventually joined, and he and I competed on the same dance aerobics team my first month at site. He spoke moderately to good English and enjoyed teaching me different Thai and Laos words and phrases. As I began to have more and more difficulties working with the community development officer at the Tessaban, I began to see Korn as an option for an alternative counterpart. I talked to him a couple times about wanting to work with him, but I'm not sure he understood what I meant. One of the project idea I was really excited to develop with Korn was a book about the history of Charoensin as told by the elders of the community. I figured that since Korn and I had a good rapport with each other and the elders in the community it was a project we could work on together.

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14 Katooney was a term used somewhat indiscriminately to describe transexuals, transvestites and gay men. In Korn's case, he lived life as a man, but occasionally dressed in drag. He also had relationships with other men.

Then the unthinkable happened. One night, evidently after drinking and getting upset at something, Korn went to his family's rice field and hung himself. I was devastated. Not only was Korn the first person I met in town that I sincerely felt could become a true friend and a good counterpart, he always seemed so happy. I had become close to several other members of his family as well, and they couldn't understand it either. During the three day wake and funeral, I spent most of my time at his mother's house helping prepare and serve food at the various meals. Even though Korn was a katooy, he had a young son. I don't really think he understood what was going on. Korn was also an only child, and as is the norm in Thailand, lived with his mother<sup>15</sup>. After the funeral was over, I spent a week or so sleeping in his house with his mother. I knew that now that the other relatives had left town, and Korn was gone, his mother would have to sleep by herself. I knew this was not something she was looking forward to, and it was something I felt like I needed to do to show my sympathy<sup>16</sup>.

### **In Review**

My two years of service with the Peace Corps in Thailand was something that

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15 Thai people do not like to be alone. Children sleep in the same bed/area as their parents well into the teenage years. Adult children very often live in their parents house, until they get married, at which point one spouse often moves into the other spouse's family house.

16 Thai people handle death and grieving much differently than Americans. When I learned that Korn was dead, I rushed over to his mother's house. When I arrived there, there was already a crowd gathered. Not long after I got there, his body was brought out so they could finish preparing it. It was somewhat shocking and disturbing to see, and I immediately broke into tears. Other than his mother, I was the only one crying. In fact, some of my friends, when they saw me crying, started to laugh. After I calmed down a little bit, someone asked me if I had seen the pictures. I said no, assuming that they were looking at pictures of Korn while he was alive. I was wrong. His cousin who had found him, or someone else, had taken pictures of him hanging from the tree.

I had worked towards for a number of years. As such, I came into the program with a different perspective than many other volunteers. In addition to my other volunteer experiences, I was a participant of the Master's International program, and had a number of relatives that had also served with the Peace Corps. As volunteers, we spent a lot of time not only talking about Thailand, Thais, our communities (and other volunteers); but also about Peace Corps as a program, and how it did (and didn't function) in Thailand. There were a number of volunteers that ended up in Thailand because they had health issues that prevented them from serving in a less developed country. There were also a group of volunteers that initially had been offered positions in an African country, but got sent to Thailand when that country's program was shut down. There were many volunteers who felt that Thailand no longer needed the Peace Corps.

### **Personal Circles of Influence**

I have discussed the concept of circles of influence, but have not talked about my own circles of influence. As a PCV, I had a couple layers/levels of circles of influence. These include: my local Thai community, my fellow PCVs, and friends and family back home. I've covered my work as it related to my local Thai community and now I would like to talk about my work as it related to my fellow PCVs. Within the Peace Corps Thailand volunteer community, there are several different volunteer lead groups. Early on, I decided I wanted to become a member of ROOT, the environmental group. When I joined the group, it was not really a functioning group, and its main activities consisted of maintaining the ROOT section on the PC Thailand volunteer website.

About half way through my first year of service, a group of friends and I started going on field trips to visit organizations doing environmental work around Thailand. Through these trips, we developed connections to a few leaders in the Thai environmental movement. One of the best connections we made was with Dr. Singh of Kasetsart University. Dr. Singh is an architecture professor known for the furniture line he designed using construction waste. From his experience he developed a course and development project at Kasetsart SCRAP lab. He teaches students how to design and develop their own products from industrial scraps. SCRAP has agreements with several different Thai manufactures, who allow them free access to their scrap material. SCRAP lab students also put on workshops for younger students. While I was in Thailand, I was able to participate in one of their workshops. As a group, ROOT started to work with SCRAP to put on our own workshop, which would be available to PCVs and their communities. While my term of service was up before the planned workshop, I have been told that they are still working towards that goal.

In addition to Dr. Singh, another important contact we made was with Mechai Viravaidya. Mr. Viravaidya is a former government worker that spearheaded family planning and AIDs awareness in Thailand. He is also known as "Mr. Condom" and has a famous restaurant in Bangkok, Cabbages and Condoms. The money generated through Cabbages and Condoms is used to support various activities and programs that Mr. Viravaidya's Population and Community Development Association (PDA) undertakes. One of PDA's newest undertaking is the Mechai Pattana School. This school is in Buriram

Province, in the southern most part of Isaan. From the Mechai Pattana school website:

*The Mechai Pattana School endeavors to promote the following values: environmental protection, education, poverty eradication, philanthropy, integrity, and democracy & gender equality.*

*Thai education has generally concentrated on literacy and numerical skills, with little emphasis on new ideas and creativity skills. The Mechai Pattana School intends to change this situation for poor, rural students.*

*The school strives towards getting its pupils to perform at their full potential by focusing on developing the complete individual. The lessons at the school are focused on enabling students to analyze and create.*

<http://www.mechaifoundation.org/school.asp>

While the school is being partly funded by PDA, the long-term vision for the school is that it will become self-sustaining. Moreover, Mechai also hopes to have the school replicated and duplicated throughout Thailand. The other ROOT members and I got to meet with Mr. Viravaidya to learn more about the school and its initiatives. He informed us that at one point, he had some PCVs that worked with him, but had lost touch with Peace Corps. After our meeting with him, we had a meeting with our Director of Programing and Training, to discuss how important we felt reestablishing a relationship with Mr. Viravaidya and PDA was.

The way we had managed to make all the contacts was through a Thai relative of mine. My uncle's wife is Thai and her sister still lives in Bangkok. She is a former professor of industrial design and is still involved in a number of product development projects. It was through her that we were



able to get a meeting with Dr. Singh, and through Dr. Singh that we were able to meet Mr. Viravaidya. She also helped me get in contact with a number of resources and groups involved in promoting natural fiber production in Thailand.

As mentioned, by the time I had made the contacts and found the resources I needed, I was close to the end of my two years of service. I had an opportunity to stay a third year, and I considered it, knowing a third year would give me more time to more fully develop my relationships with Dr. Singh and Mr. Viravaidya and my tourism project. The problem was I knew that the tourism/weaving project would take much longer than just a year to get up and running, and longer still to become self-sustaining. While all the elements were there to make the project successful: local weaving knowledge, a local textile factory, connections to national resources, a stated community desire, there was a distinct and important missing element: a local leader. I had come to the harsh realization that while I had developed a vision for the community based off stated community desires; local, national and regional context, I did not have someone I was working with at the local level who understood my vision, or could work with me to take it to the next level. No one in my office felt my idea was something the community could (or would) support, and none of the current leaders of the weaving group, school, or textile factory really had the time or desire to undertake such a project. In fact, what I needed was a local entrepreneur that could fund and run the project separate from the Tessaban. I believe the project needed at least three more years before it would get to the point that I could step away (assuming I had found a

partner before then). While I felt invested in my community and invested in Peace Corps, I knew I was not invested enough in this project. It was not something that excited me, nor was it something I wanted to dedicate the next several years of my life to. So I made the decision to leave.

### **In Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, I laid out several questions I wanted to explore within. I'd now like to return to these questions.

#### **As an American organization, how does Peace Corps balance change-agency and economic development?**

To answer this, I'd like to return to something I touched on earlier, conversations we had as PCVs about Peace Corps. A great failing of Peace Corps, in my eyes, is how it bills itself as a development organization. From the mythos surrounding the program, a lot of volunteers come into the program thinking they are going to build schools and save lives. The reality is often far from that image. Sometimes so far PCVs get disillusioned and quit. Anytime a friend expressed this type of frustration, I tried to remind them that Peace Corps is primarily an organization designed to develop international friendship and goodwill for Americans and by Americans. I would also talk with them about how "development" doesn't just mean building things, it is also about the impact they had on their community through their interpersonal relationship and that sometimes the change created through these relationships is the hardest change to see because the

impact may not be felt until long after you are gone. Finally, I liked to remind them that the amazing and great thing about Peace Corps was how well it prepared PCVs for a future in international work, and the world perspective shift it provides for those that stay domestic.

**How does the historical roles and development of Peace Corps affect its success as a community development organization?**

From the Sargent Shriver website (2011):

*Concerned about the influence of Soviet communism around the world, and seeking to harness the energy and enthusiasm of America's youth, John F. Kennedy called for the creation of a Peace Corps -- an organization of young ambassadors who, by serving those in need around the world, would demonstrate the values that made the U.S. a good neighbor and trustworthy friend.*

As with the answer above, I think we need to look at Peace Corps from a perspective beyond the 2-year service period. One must understand the historical motivations and context of the founding of Peace Corps to accurately critique it. Peace Corps, and AmeriCorps, were the brain-children of Sargent Shriver and at the heart these organizations are about civic responsibility and peaceful national service. They are essentially altruistic organizations striving to survive in the modern world of the "me firsts" and the gimme gimmes. However flawed and bureaucratic these organizations may have become, it is the responsibility of each individual PCV, or AmeriCorps member, to live up to (or not) the ideals of Shriver. So when we look at the success of Peace Corps as a community development agency, we must look at it in that context. And we must realize one important community Peace Corps

is clearly developing is the community of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs).

**Is Peace Corps a development organization?**

Yes. In so much as it is developing a community of RPCVs that have had life changing experiences that motivate and compel them to continue to work towards, and for, something bigger than themselves.

**How does my personal community development theory affect the community development interventions I undertake?**

Through my years of service in AmeriCorps, Peace Corps and with other organizations, I have tried to remember three important things:

1. Change starts from within,
2. Sometimes the biggest impact you can have on someone's life is just being there when they need you,
3. Change takes time.

These three simple beliefs are at the core of my theory of community development. Now, I may have some more complex and convoluted ideas about economic development, political and civic responsibilities, but these are not yet formed in such a manner to allow me to apply them clearly and concisely to the task of evaluating my Thai experience. So, how did these three fundamental beliefs affect what I did (and didn't) do in Peace Corps?

1. Peace Corps has made me realize that I still have a lot of internal work to do
2. Above all, I tried to make spending time in and with my community my priority. Whether this took the form of visiting friends in the hospital, staying with Korn's mother, or just sitting with my older friends while we watched the world go by.
3. This is a double-edged sword. While I don't have unrealistic expectations of seeing immediate, significant changes, I also know what kind of time commitments innovative projects take.

**How successful were these interventions?**

This I can't be sure of. I know my involvement in and connection to my community meant a lot to my Thais. I was often told that I was *kon jai-dii* (good hearted) and I know many of them didn't want me to go, but how significantly I impacted anyone's life? I can't say. I can say this, I do know conversations I had and relationships I had with a few fellow PCVs significantly impacted their lives. I do also know that Peace Corps has given me the ability to recognize my personal needs and the courage to make sure these needs are being met.

When it comes to the reasons for CBOD program (to work towards the decentralization of the government), I can say that my work probably at little to no impact. The manner in which project are designed, by governmental employees in Bangkok, or Provincial capitals, then handed down to local governments, is still extremely centralized. Even given

that, in many cases, Thais are not taught to look at things critically or taught problem solving skills. However, I did see many of my Thai friends and colleagues utilize ingenuity that is not common in America. The issue may be more that Thais do not see themselves as leaders. They are taught throughout their life to obey their superiors, and as such, do not push the envelope much. To me, addressing this issue always got into that sticky area of "cultural" change, which is not what a Peace Corps volunteer should be aiming for. Often times, I actually did wonder what I was even doing in my town as they did already have a number of good initiatives started, that seemed to be developing at a distinctly Thai speed. Which was also something I tried to keep in mind a lot, that Thailand moves at a different speed than America.

**What can be learned about community development from my experiences in Peace Corps, and how will I apply that in future endeavors?**

I probably actually learned more about myself than community development while in Peace Corps. One of the greatest realizations I had was that I am often focused on higher-level needs than those of the communities I serve. While my community was not greatly impoverished, there was a definitive focus on materialism within the community. In fact, other than English lessons, the other most common request I got was to find American/white spouse for my friends, coworkers, and strangers. I knew of several farang houses around town, and they did tend to be the biggest and grandest houses in town. But there are also large houses that belong to those that work in the government, and the biggest tend to be those that have a wife and

husband that both work in government (usually one of the government offices and a police officer) and also still do a lot of farming. Agriculture is the lifestyle here and other jobs and occupations primarily serve to produce and consume goods. Whether it is the high tech gadgets and gizmos bought with formal sector funds, or the hand-made mats and cloths produced by the local crafts people, the buying and selling of goods is a constant source of activity in the community.

Another thing I realized about myself is that I have a tendency to develop grand, sweeping visions for communities. Often times, I get frustrated because organizations or people I'm working with don't understand my visions, or feel they are not achievable. Looking back, I now see how this tendency has caused me to butt heads with a number of past supervisors. As a result, I've come to the realization that until I feel I can make a commitment to a specific community and a specific vision, I need to focus on my internal change.

I wonder to myself what this place must have been like before the tourism boom and the Thai tiger era, and I see a lot more trees, and a simpler life. But maybe that time never existed and in any case, time is not like an insect stuck in amber, preserved for all eternity in one moment. It is constantly shifting, adjusting to itself, and bring us, as humans along with it. Thailand, and the world at large, has been navigating the waters of global capitalism now since the fall of the Berlin wall and the Iron curtain. Even those corners of the world that may not be part of the greater tide of change, have still been affected by its flow around the

world. A rising tide may lift all ships, but what of those that never had a boat to begin with, or never learned to swim, or frankly just were not looking for any rising tide anyway. Do they get washed out to sea in a tsunami? Do they get built over and forgotten about? And how do I, as a neo-ludite, non-materialistic person adjust to the reality that sometimes, some people do just want to be consumers?

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