


S H A R E

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FOCUS ~ AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Environmentally Sustainable Development in Thailand

Written by: Jojo Poon

What is “development”? What kind of development will lead to better living? In what way will go by contraries? We might be able to find out more from the experience of the farming tribes in Northern Thailand.

The aftermath of the Green Revolution

The Lahus settled in the mountains in Northern Thailand as a result of a multi-generational search for farmable lands in the areas spanning across Thailand, Myanmar and Laos.

They were caught in the Green Revolution in 1960 when the Thai Government encouraged the farmers to focus on growing new types of valuable plants with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that boosted their yields. The Lahus started to homogenize the crops they grow and depend on government loans in purchasing the seeds and chemicals.

The Green Revolution resulted in a multiplied yield of Thailand’s rice grains and corns by 2.6 and 7.3 times respectively within 50 years from 1961 to 2011. However, the synthetic fertilizers used while farming has increased by 139

times within the same period; from 1993, the pesticides usage rate has increased by 3.6 times. Sadly, the paradigm shift posted the least benefit to individual farmers like the Lahus in the mountains, where they had to bear the economic consequences and debt crisis from the long-term fluctuation of weather and crop prices, in addition to the environmental damage done to the farm lands and water sources by the heavy use of chemicals; the food they grew and consumed also became a health concern to the tribe.

Sustainable farming and regaining freedom, safety, and dignity

CEDAR’s partner, the Thai-Lahu Foundation (TLF), is a longtime supporter of the Lahus scattered across Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, where they saw even more damages done by development. The head of TLF, Pastor Praseng, remembered seeing a weak Lahu woman helplessly sitting outside a hospital. She was a migrant worker in Chiang Mai who was affected by HIV/AIDS from an unknown source. In the end she did not get help since she could not speak Thai while the hospital staff could not speak Lahu.

The Lahus are natives to the forest who survived on hunting and farming. However, a lot of young tribesmen left their homes and joined others when the Thai government encouraged the rural laborers to work in cities to support the country’s industrial growth. In turn, HIV/AIDS and drugs were brought back to the villages in Northern Thailand when the laborers returned.

CEDAR has been supporting TLF’s work since 2008, where they would promote HIV/AIDS and drug addiction prevention education in the Lahu communities, while mobilizing the churches to take care of the affected families. They also taught the villagers organic farming methods, hoping that they could sustain themselves and have an option to stay and develop their communities instead of leaving for the cities.

Villagers were grateful to the project since it strengthened the bonds between neighbors who would otherwise not interact. They went from working individually to collaborating their farming plans together to grow seasonal crops, and in turn built mutual trust and understanding.

They have further collaborated in planning how to protect their environment from excessive logging and hunting. TLF helped them by mobilizing the local churches and villages to plant

trees, establish fire safety lines, enact fishing restrictions, and bred fish and local vegetables. After a few years, the variety of fishes has been doubled, and the villagers could enjoy greater harvests from their farms. They would present their first harvests at the altar in the church as a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and hold feasts outside the church doors for people of every belief, social class, race, and gender.



Tree saplings prepared by the villagers



Sacrifice of the first harvests to God

To TLF, development is to let the people obtain the joy of an abundant life, where they could fulfill their basic needs in food and shelter under a free, equal, dignifying, safe and beautiful environment.

From homeless to self-sustainable

On the way leaving the mountain homes of the Lahus, one could see self-built houses on the sides of the freeway where only dust and crumbles lie. Those are the homes of 50+ families of the Palaung tribe, the majority of whom are Myanmar migrant workers left to work in Northern Thailand ten to twenty years ago, and some have given birth to children throughout the years.

The residency registration system in Thailand is complicated. The corruption in the government and the political instability of the country did not help either when a person from the minority groups in Northern Thailand tries to obtain his legal alien status, much less an official Thai citizenship for some. The lack of proper citizenship, and consequently of land ownership, forced them to work as temps in local factories and farms. Hope is a luxury for them as they could barely afford food for the family on the meager wage.

Another partner of ours, the Upland Holistic Development Project (UHDP), is devoted in Holistic Community Development that improves the lives of the minorities in four aspects, namely environment restoration, economic empowerment, spiritual inspiration, and responsibilities and rights. For the Palaung families, development starts in their tiny backyards.

Our partner helped the villagers to remodel their backyards of the size of half a classroom into farmable lands with a variety of vegetables. Mr. Bunsak Thongdi (Ajan Tui), the Director of UHDP, told us that the farm could provide more than enough vegetables for one family that reduces its living cost. They could even share with their neighbors their excess harvests.

“God has given us every nutrition we need to grow crops since creation, but we constantly mistreat our land and cause imbalances in our environment.” Said Tui. He continued to tell us that the mission of UHDP was to teach the families to live with the land in harmony and reap its fruits in ways intended by God in his creation, even if that only means for them to manage the little farm they had.



Rearing 3 children, Mon and his wife are one of the Palaung families. Their income is mainly from working as daily laborers by the parents and two of the children at the age of 18 and 15. Three years ago, UHDP encouraged Mon to use his small backyard as a farm to organically grow seasonal vegetables and fruits while also using it to raise pigs. The results were very positive as the organic vegetables could feed the family and even be sold for extra income. “Now we even have spare money to send our youngest kid to school,” said Mon.

UHDP also teaches the villagers to utilize natural resources in making fuel-effective stoves, water filters, water tanks, etc. that improves their lives.

Tui told us that the Palaungs are in need of food and shelter, and also protection from the government, he said, “Most of them are refugees who fled from Myanmar in the early days. Nobody cared about them here and the government had further showed mistrust in them due to misunderstandings.” Some Palaungs had lived in the mountains of Northern Thailand for over 40 years, and the government thought they were excessively logging and burning the forest for farming, hence prohibited them from living and farming around the forest areas. UHDP published documentaries of the farming practices of the Palaungs via the media in order to urge the government to reconsider its policy to allow the Palaungs to continue farming in their current lands.



UNDP Staff teaching the villagers how to make fermented plant juice from papayas that they use in composting, gardening and livestock production.

The development brought by CEDAR's partners to the Northern borders of Thailand is one that reconnected people with the land and each other, in sharing the goodness and abundance of God. They realigned human with the order of the creation through organic farming training, environmental education, land advocacy, and resource sharing. Just as described in Luke 4:18, development is exhibited through extending Jesus' heavenly mission before His second coming, by bringing reconciliation between men and God, rediscovering His glory in us, freeing the oppressed, being one with our environment, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

Act duly and extensively

We could do much more than only offering prayers and donations when we care for the poor. Living a simple life is not only a personal training of patient and virtue, but is also a practical way to fight against worldly cultures and values that disrespect God's creation and forfeit our responsibilities to manage the earth.

During Lent this year (the 40-days period before Easter), CEDAR has prepared 6 Simple Life prayer and action plans for churches and Christians alike to reflect on our lifestyle and renew our attitudes to God, to each other, and to the land, while emphasizing in leading a simple and loving life.

Please refer to the following website for more details (in Chinese only): <http://cedarfund.org/carbonfast/>

BACK TO THE BIBLE



Cared for by the Creation (Matthew 6:24-34)

Dr. Bernard Wong, a Board Member of CEDAR, suggests that this familiar passage not only teaches us the correct attitude towards work and labor, but also reminds us about our relationship with God's creation. Please visit <http://bit.ly/cedar-share223-biblestudy> for the full article. The following is an excerpt:

Birds "do not sow or reap or store away in barns," but their needs are satisfied; flowers "do not labor or spin," but they are as beautiful as they could be. They are the perfect example of a worry-free life and it reminded us that our basic needs could all be satisfied from the creation itself, and that the beauty of life is not entirely based on self-development.

However, people nowadays seem to go further away from believing that the creation has got us covered. We not only labored and spun, but we have also developed a bunch of technologies and products, thinking they would improve the quality of our lives, make us more beautiful, and make us happier... Now we are only comfortable and happy when separated from the nature and holding our high-tech gadgets; the "normal" people now are those who constantly live in buildings and malls, breathe nothing but air-cons, bathe in UV tanning beds, and play with their cellphones... But Jesus tells us, "Look at the birds who are satisfied without all the products, and look at the flowers that are so beautiful without moving an inch!"

We have alienated ourselves from the creation and hindered it with our technologies and consumerist lifestyles. The thicker we build the artificial wall with products that makes us forget our nature, the less we feel accommodated by it; the more resources we extract from the nature, the less it become suitable for us to live. The vicious cycle starts when human could no longer live without high-tech products...

Jesus did not intend for us to completely forego technology and go back to live the life of a caveman. All He did was to remind us that we should learn from the birds and flowers who could be satisfied and be beautiful without air-con, sun blocks, cellphones, shopping, and traveling, which already got what they need from their environment. Environmental preservation has become a hot topic recently, and Christians are generally called to care for the creation, but I suggest that we could not achieve that unless we are deeply motivated by how we are first cared for by the creation. ▶

JOIN HANDS JOIN HEARTS



Sharing Land and Cultivating

Did you know that children ministry could combine with community resettlement and agricultural development?

CEDAR's partner, Fullmoon, started building children's home 20 years ago to take care of the children affected by wars, disasters, and poverty. Since Myanmar opened up its borders in 2012, multiple foreign corporations entered the country for its natural resources such as gold, minerals, and forests. Our partner thought that agricultural development would have a much more lasting impact to the post-war communities than other endeavors. Hence, they started to reclaim large areas around the children homes along the borders of Yangon for agricultural purposes, and invited poor farmers without any lands to come over and farm. They further trained the farmers in organic farming methods. The farmers could use the lands at no cost while only offering parts of their harvests to feed the children in the Fullmoon children homes.

We are glad that twenty years later, with Fullmoon's support, some of the graduates from the children homes who were trained in agriculture, education, and medicine are now willing to return to their war-ridden homes and contribute to their reconstruction in their own capacity. We pray that God will continue to use this group of blessed children to convey His love and peace to Myanmar.

Visit <http://bit.ly/cedar-share233-cm> to view the full article.

OPERATING STATEMENT

Jul 16 – Jan 17			
Income	Donations	HK\$	5,176,499
	Grants		578,986
	Appeal for Relief		395,963
	Other Income		3,434
		HK\$	6,154,872
Expenditure	Projects	Asia	3,570,948
		China	1,635,913
		Africa	1,120,324
	Disaster Relief & Rehabilitation Projects		661,692
	Education & Promotion		878,716
	Administration		856,568
		HK\$	8,724,161
Surplus/(Deficit)	HK\$	(2,569,289)	

TAKING ACTION



A Passion for Farming—An Interview with Hand the Farmer

Wu Ying Lun, Hand had been an Education and Promotion staff at CEDAR for 4 years, who was initially inspired in farming by our partners' projects in Northern Thailand in 2009, where he saw the consequences of monoculture in the villages, and on the other hand, how they could also develop with agricultural advancements. Hand was surprised by the vast power of seeds that could change a village and grew in his passion in agriculture, which led him to become a full-time farmer now.

Unlike his office work, Hand discovered that farming is at the complete mercy of the nature where things often do not go as planned. A farmer could not survive and work in the fields solely by himself, instead he must work with the weather and the land.

The field experience in the farm gave Hand some new insights to God's words too, "Why didn't the Bible say to 'give riches to the poor,' but instead to give them the good news?" Said Hand, who learned from his farming experience that the freedom for the poor, in fact, means more than financial freedom, where it also gives them autonomy. He thought that to harvest and enjoy as much as a person can from the land in harmony with the weather, ecology, and the land condition, is as free and autonomous as he could get...

Please visit <http://bit.ly/cedar-share223-hk> for the full article and read about Hand's farming life and plans in details, and the interviewer's reflection after the interview.

Remarks:

- ▶ The annual budget from 7/2016 to 6/2017 is 18,100,608 HKD.
- ▶ There is a total of 7 million HKD spendings on projects from 7/2016 to 1/2017. Reserves were used to cover the deficit.
- ▶ Please support CEDAR's and its partners' work with prayers and donations. 🙏