Mechai Viravaidya

Since 1974, Mechai Viravaidya has been creating and running innovative family planning and poverty reduction programs throughout Southeast Asia. From the time that he began his work, the average number of children in Thai families has decreased from 7 to 1.5.

Mechai was born in Bangkok to a Scottish mother and a Thai father, both of whom were doctors and had met when studying in Edinburgh.

Mechai founded the Population and Community Development Association in 1974 to address the unsustainable population growth rate in Thailand of over 3% annually at the time. A variety of humorous, innovative, and unorthodox methods were utilised in conjunction with mobilising and educating a network of rural school teachers and village community members to make contraceptives available throughout Thailand. This resulted in the more sustainable population growth rate of 0.5% by 2003.

When HIV/AIDS first appeared in Thailand in the mid-1980s, similar methods were used to launch a major prevention program, which resulted in a 90% decline in new infections according to UNAIDS and an estimated 7.7 million lives saved according to the World Bank, within 12 years.

Over the course of his career Mechai was appointed to such key positions as Thailand's Cabinet spokesman, the Minister of the Office of the Prime Minister, and Chairman of several of Thailand's largest government-owned enterprises.

He was also elected to the Senate between 1987-1991, 1996-2000, and 2000-2006. Recognising that civil society organisations cannot survive and expand solely on the generosity of others, Mechai Viravaidya established Thailand's first social enterprise to help fund the operating costs of PDA in 1975.

Since then, DPA has spawned 18 other social enterprises which have contributed significantly to the financial needs of the association.

Following his success at promoting contraception and HIV prevention, Mechai has aggressively approached the problem of rural poverty by empowering the poor through the Village Development Partnership, to build sustainable entrepreneurial capacity, community empowerment for health, and income generating activities at the village level in Southeast Asia.

For his efforts in various development and educational endeavours, Mechai has been acclaimed with numerous awards and recognition. These include the United Nations Population Award, the Bill and Melinda Gates Award for Global Health, the Prince Mahidol Award for Public Health, the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, and the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship.

He was also named one of Asiaweek's "20 Great Asians", and one of TIME Magazine's "Asian Heroes" to mark the magazine's 60th year of its publication in Asia.