



# Making a Difference

## A Lifelong Learning Center



Young students studying agriculture at The Mechai Bamboo School (left); Vivien and Alan Hassenfeld at the Hassenfeld House at The Mechai Bamboo School (above)

An Interview with  
Mechai Viravaidya, The Mechai Bamboo School

**EDITORS' NOTE** Mechai Viravaidya founded the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) in 1974. In between running PDA's activities, he 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 and 1991, 1996 and 2000, and 2000 and 2006. Recognizing that civil society organizations cannot survive and expand solely on the generosity of others, Mechai established Thailand's first social enterprise to help fund the operating costs of PDA in 1975. Since then, this company has spawned 28 other social enterprises, which have contributed significantly to the financial needs of the association.



Mechai Viravaidya

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** The Mechai Bamboo School ([mechai.pattana.ac.th](http://mechai.pattana.ac.th)) is an innovative secondary school, which is also engaged in community development. This rural boarding school was established to become a lifelong learning center for all and to act as a hub for social and economic advancement in surrounding villages. The school educates 180 students and also has a community development arm, which provides assistance and cooperation to small rural schools and their surrounding communities, as well as a Social Enterprise arm that aims to provide financial support to the schools for the running of the school. The Bamboo School is located in Buriram province, Northeast Thailand, near the Cambodian border.

### Would you provide an overview of the mission and vision behind the Bamboo School?

In my early working days, I thought that anything that needed to be done should be implemented by the government, but over time, I realized that much must be done by the people who really own the country, rather than the government.

I started the Bamboo School to be a lifelong learning center for all and not just for children. People from surrounding communities can come and master whatever they want to learn, be it in cooking, writing, law, or safe-sex.

The school aims to foster good citizens who are honest, willing to share, and truly

accept and practice gender equality. We teach students life skills and occupational skills in preparation for them to become community leaders and social entrepreneurs. They are taught to look for answers, solve problems, and never to give up.

**This is a broad curriculum that impacts how people think. Have your students reacted well to it?**

We believe that Thai education needs to be changed: We need to redefine what we want to teach to reflect life skills and occupation skills,

not just literacy and numerical skills; we also want to change the way we teach; and finally we want to change the role of the school, from being an institution just for young students into a lifelong learning center for all as well as an engine of change to promote social and economic advancement for entire communities around the school.

We instituted a system where students and parents do not pay their school fees with money. Instead, they must share the responsibility of performing 800 hours of community service and planting 800 trees each year. In this innovative school, students help to manage the school, ranging from interviewing and selecting incoming students to interviewing and selecting their own teachers. All purchases and audits at the school are carried out by students, who are also responsible for drawing up the school budget. In addition, students are engaged in many types of businesses.

We have received funds from some companies to help us introduce our concept in 50 schools each year. We emphasize community empowerment and the establishment of an agricultural and business Social Enterprise in the school. The longer term objective of this approach is to assist parents to get out of poverty.

Each month, many visitors come to observe student activities. In addition, our students are sent to several conferences and seminars organized for heads of small government schools to make presentations about the Bamboo School. Many have asked for our cooperation, and we are seeking assistance from the business community to help them.

**How young are you starting, and are the adults also using the school as you had hoped?**

On every first and third Wednesday of each month, our Bamboo School students travel to 10 surrounding schools to teach classes to primary age children and help with agricultural activities. On the other two Wednesdays, Bamboo School students accompany these children to their home villages and communities to visit elderly people, help to improve home vegetable gardens, clean their homes, and pick up plastic materials in the village.

We also invite elderly citizens into our school to enable them to join younger children in learning about vegetable growing and exercising as well as issues concerning health.

Bamboo School students have recently been taught about the need for proper nutrition for pregnant women as well as for babies and pre-kindergarten children. On their fortnightly visit, they will go to homes of pregnant women to offer advice on nutritional needs. This is repeated every two weeks.

Thailand now has approximately six million children living with their grandparents, rather than with their fathers and mothers who have migrated to find work in the city. We classify these children as "Artificial Orphans." We are helping these grandparents to better understand the nutritional and developmental stimulation needs of their grandchildren and to provide regular inputs of both types of needs.

We see positive changes in children and grandchildren and see that income of grandparents is increasing.

**How large can a program like this become?**

Our endeavor to turn schools into lifelong learning centers and hubs for social and economic advancement is rapidly gaining acceptance and support. We just have to sign on more people with more resources. I hope that many companies will help to establish a school like ours and partner with us to help start more schools. The more funding we are able to get to help other schools, the greater will be the expansion. This can be done around the world.

**Is there a role for the government to play in this type of project?**

The government is encouraging us to help popularize our new concept of education. Visitors are generally impressed by what students have been able to achieve, but we have a long way to go to get our message accepted throughout society. With more ambitious tax incentives from the government, more members of the business community would join in this endeavour. ●