

Working Between the Navel and t

By Floyd

Mechai Viravaidya—popularly known as “Mr. Condom”—is on a mission to help people think about poverty

When the HIV/AIDS epidemic swept through Thailand in the early 1990s, the government took a risk.

They looked to an unusual group—the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) and its founder, Mechai Viravaidya—for help in solving the daunting and complex dilemma of how to stop the spread of the deadly new virus.

“We were already working in the area between the knees and the navel!” when the AIDS crisis hit Thailand, says Mr. Viravaidya. After some prodding, the government recognized PDA’s expertise in addressing issues of reproductive health and population control. Health officials also took a chance on Mr. Viravaidya, whose methods were controversial and unconventional, but effective.

Born in Australia to a Scottish mother and a Thai father, Mr. Viravaidya obtained a degree in commerce from Melbourne University before moving to Thailand in the mid-1960s to work as a government economist. He quickly recognized that Thailand’s rapid population growth was stymieing the country’s economic development and increasing poverty.

In 1974, the average Thai family had seven children, and the country maintained a 3.3% population growth rate. “There was no future in this,” he said. “It needed to change.” In response, he founded the PDA and redefined the concept of family planning with a model that is now replicated around the world.

A doctor’s prescription was required to obtain birth control pills. In Thailand at the time, that was no easy task in a country with nine doctors per 1 million



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people. With PDA's support, nurses and midwives were trained to prescribe "the pill"—a move that expanded coverage to 20% of the nation's villages. And that was only the beginning.

Mr. Viravaidya's group worked with the government to allow village shopkeepers to sell birth control pills. Even hairdressers were later allowed to distribute the medicine. This provided access to birth control for 100% of Thailand's women and, more importantly perhaps, put the birth control decision in women's hands.

To further support Thai women's control of their future, PDA offered microcredit programs for women who were not pregnant. This innovative program in 1975 was a forerunner to the now-popular conditional cash transfer programs, a form of development assistance that makes payments subject to social conditions, such as immunizations or family planning.

Vasectomy Festivals

Mr. Viravaidya and his group did not focus only on the pill. They simultaneously attacked the stigma of condom use by training 320,000 teachers in 5 years on the benefits of condom use for family planning. PDA even organized competitions in which school children blew up condoms into balloons and received a Snakes & Ladders family planning game.

On the male side of the equation, PDA innovatively addressed the fear of men to undergo a vasectomy. The nongovernment organization (NGO) organized a Millionaire Vasectomy Festival in coordination with the national lottery bureau, which gave a free lottery ticket to all men who



ROLE MODEL These mannequins were decorated with condoms for an anti-AIDS campaign at Mechai Viravaidya's Cabbages & Condoms restaurant in Bangkok. The founder of the Population and Community Development Association is known for using creative ways in addressing reproductive health and population control issues.

were vasectomized. PDA also organized a mobile vasectomy bus that would roll into villages around Thailand to provide the free service.

At the Father's Day Vasectomy Festival, PDA enlisted wives and children to encourage men to have the procedure done. A vasectomy offered the family a better life and a bigger inheritance. PDA even included foreign men in this effort, with a vasectomy party on the United States Independence Day and a Kangaroo Vasectomy Festival on Australia's National Day.

To address religious concerns about population control and family planning, Mr. Viravaidya enlisted the support of Buddhist monks, who publicly blessed contraceptives with holy water before they were distributed to the public.

The fruits of these labors were dramatic. The average number of children per family fell from 7 in 1974 to 1.2 in 2005. The population growth rate during that same period fell from 3.3% to 0.5%. The rate has remained stable and low ever since.

"We've reached the point in Thailand where most families don't want to have too


many children," says Mr. Viravaidya. "They are educated. They understand the implications of family planning. Now, all we have to do is maintain the services to support them."

Captain Condom

In the late 1980s, HIV/AIDS slammed Thailand, and the government appeared ill-prepared to deal with the looming crisis. "Denial was the order of the day while thousands of Thais were being infected," says Mr. Viravaidya. "No AIDS-related news was permitted on radio or TV."

Mr. Viravaidya circumvented this government policy by going straight to the country's powerful military, which controlled 300 radio stations and two television stations. By 1990, Mr. Viravaidya had convinced the head of Thailand's military to air AIDS education commercials on the military stations. The rest of the government fell in line a year later.

In 1991, Thailand's Prime Minister was named chairman of the country's National AIDS Endeavor, which elevated the problem above the limited role and



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power of the country’s Ministry of Health. A 50-fold increase in the government budget for HIV and AIDS followed. Once unleashed, Mr. Viravaidya and his group used the same aggressive, controversial, yet effective tactics they had sharpened in the battle to bring down Thailand’s population growth rate.

While the government mandated that a 30-second HIV/AIDS educational announcement be made during every hour of broadcast on 488 radio stations and six television stations, the nation—with Mr. Viravaidya’s group taking a leadership role—was mobilized to address the issue through the use of condoms.

Condoms were distributed at bus stops, toll booths, banks, shopping centers, nightclubs, and even in hotel mini-bars. Gas stations offered a free box of condoms with a full tank of gas, and one of the world’s largest fast-food chains offered condoms with their hamburgers. Even Thailand’s police were drafted into service. Under the “Cops and Rubbers” program, traffic violators received a condom with their citation or warning.

As always with PDA, there was no shortage of fun added to the process. A Captain Condom and Miss Condom beauty pageant was held, as were condom-inspired fashion shows. The group promoted condom coin purses and the use of condoms to keep mobile phones dry in the rain.

In a landmark program that has been replicated around the world, Mr. Viravaidya’s group offered small business loans to people with HIV/AIDS on the condition that they partner with someone who does not have the disease. This highly successful program—91% of loans were paid back on time—discouraged stigmatizing people with the ailment. Mr. Viravaidya’s group also encouraged companies to offer workplace education on HIV/AIDS with the slogan: “Sick staff can’t work. Dead customers don’t buy.”

Thailand’s anti-HIV/AIDS program has been a globally recognized success. By 2004, the country experienced a 90% reduction in new HIV infections. The World Bank estimated in 2005 that the country’s efforts had saved 7.7 million lives and \$18 billion in treatment costs. Though a catastrophe was averted, Thailand today is dealing with some of the same problems of complacency that many countries are struggling to address regarding HIV/AIDS, says Mr. Viravaidya.

Surviving on Begging

PDA has grown into a diverse development organization with more than 800 staff and 12,000 volunteers working in 18 regional development centers in 15 provinces throughout Thailand. Most notably, PDA

operates 18 private companies—including the popular Cabbages & Condoms restaurants and resorts—to support its development work.

Mr. Viravaidya sees this blending of private sector ownership and not-for-profit development work as the model for the future, adding that he has no fear of development organizations losing focus and turning into profit-driven enterprises.

“The Catholic Church owns a lot of land but that doesn’t make it a property developer,” says Mr. Viravaidya. “Our companies don’t define our work. They support it. Most NGOs are beggars, and that is not sustainable. You can’t expect to survive on begging alone.”

Mr. Viravaidya was appointed ambassador to The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in 1999. He has also received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service and the United Nations Population Award. Most recently, he won the Bill and Melinda Gates Award for Global Health and the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, each of which included a cash prize of \$1 million.

Despite the global acclaim, the greatest recognition of his work is likely something heard every day in taxicabs, hotels, stores, and bedrooms throughout Thailand: “Mechai” has become the Thai nickname for condom. ●