

Thaioil implements ‘Build Canal, Build People’ project to bolster sustainable community development

The drought crisis has become a cause of concern for all Thai people, making headlines frequently in recent years. However, there is little doubt that those who have been worst hit by the crisis are the country's farmers, particularly those in the northeast, who have experienced severe flooding on their rice fields in the rainy season and extreme drought in the dry season. These conditions are mainly the result of the region's geographical characteristics.

The crisis has been recurrent for several years, prompting villages in Nong Bode sub-district, Nang Rong district of Buriram province to seek solutions. The Water Management and Village Development project or ‘Build Canal, Build People’ in Thai, to develop an irrigation canal system to support the agriculture sector, has been initiated in collaboration with the Education and Public Welfare Foundation (EPWF) and Thai Oil Public Company Limited (Thaioil).

“We don't want to finish the project by just building canals, but rather aim to embed a learning process for the villagers,” explained **Bangkok Chowkwanyun, Director and General Manager of EPWF**. “It doesn't mean we teach them only one day and come home. Instead, we try to get acquainted with them by living with them for weeks or months at a time to really understand their ways of living. This permits us to understand their problems through conversations and consequently enables us to come up with the most constructive solutions.”



Bangkok Chowkwanyun

Bangkok said the most important problem here is the lack of an efficient water management system, with no places for water storage. The project started with canal excavation with the participation of the villagers. It facilitated exchange of knowledge between the villagers and engineers, which helped promote development of the people and community at the same time.

Atikom Terbsiri, CEO and President of Thai oil Public Company Limited, said social responsibility is a core mission of Thaioil. The ‘Build Canal, Build People’ project has enabled villagers to access water resources with the help of Thaioil's experienced civil engineers who can effectively plan canal excavations.



Atikom Terbsiri

The canal excavations have yielded satisfactory results. By providing the villagers with access to water, the project has successfully solved the drought crisis and raised villagers' productivity levels, thereby improving their quality of life.



The first village under the ‘Build Canal, Build People’ project is Nongtaktion village. **Village headman Seksan Sirimongkol** said that previously the area around the village was extremely dry and lacked water resources for farming due to long periods of no rainfall. This problem urged the village to look for solutions and seek help from EPWF and Thaioil. Prior to project implementation, EPWF and Thaioil set a condition that the villagers would have to sacrifice a part of their land for the construction of a new canal for the communal benefit.



Seksan Sirimongkol

To convince them to agree to this condition, they received clear explanations on how to transport water from the Lamart River to the higher ground of their farming areas.

“Thaioil's volunteer engineers and I assured them that water from the Pohdaeng Weir on the Lamart River would definitely flow to their farmland provided that the



canal beds of the Pohdaeng Weir and the new one are of the same depth. Walking from the river to their farmland, the villagers felt like they went uphill. So, they couldn't imagine how water from lower ground could flow to higher ground. We then had to explain to them that the new canal would draw water from the Weir and the River when excavation of the canal beds are equally deep and by gravitational flow to the higher ground, regardless of the differing altitudes,” Seksan added.



The building of the new canal was completed in a period of six months with close collaboration between the villagers and Thaioil engineers. Measuring 2,040 meters in length, the canal has greatly benefited the villagers. Today, the villagers have no need to worry about water shortages when the dry season arrives, as they have sufficient water stored for rice farming and vegetable growing, which has since boosted their productivity.

“What the villagers have learnt from the Thaioil engineers is how to excavate a canal, how to measure the canal level with the use of an irrigation device and how to sustainably maintain the canal. As well, the use of the new canal has promoted the social value of sharing and generosity among the villagers,” Seksan added.

Although small in size, the new canal has benefited around 500-600 rai of farming areas, marking the first important step of the project. The next steps are therefore easier for the Chokchai village, which has seen a new canal excavation of the same type as the first one, and the Thaihong village, which has witnessed the construction of a water channel to effectively drain flood waters.

Nong Thong Lim already has an existing canal but excavation to make it deeper enabled better storage of rain water. This project prompted **Charoen Plakkratok, Village Head of Nong Thom Lim and chief of organic farming**, who had seen increased yields of rice, to initiate the “Community Villagers Promote Organic Farming” project, since many villagers had already started to reduce the use of chemical fertilizers. The project sought to avoid the use of herbicides but to use chicken and cow manure as fertilizer in order to produce good-quality and safe rice.



Charoen Plakkratok

After passing through various processes, rice from the village is vacuum-packed in one kilogram packages. Currently, six types of rice are available - jasmine rice, red jasmine rice, germinated jasmine rice, germinated red jasmine rice, brown rice and germinated brown rice.

When purchasing rice, the villagers will buy in their own community first. The village head guarantees the price for the other villagers with the price for jasmine rice set at Bt14.50 and red jasmine rice Bt14. Dividends are also paid

to members who hold shares creating income security for the villagers.

“But the problem faced by the villagers is marketing. EPWF and Thaioil have realized our intention and helped establish the “Nong Thong Lim Rice for Life” project in order to support knowledge building and training, and to take villagers on visits to organic rice community enterprises so that rice sales more systematic in future. The project also seeks to locate sales outlets so that people outside the community will become more familiar with the project and the villagers will gain an additional source of income.”



The success and smiles of the locals could never have been realized without the efforts of volunteer staff from the ThaiOil Group such as **Kriengsak Trilerklith, chief engineer of the project**.

“Before starting on the project, we need to survey the area in advance, since each site and the needs of each group of villagers are quite distinct. From the survey we can do the design and calculate how much soil needs to be excavated for road construction. If we don't do it this way, it will be difficult to fix any errors once excavation is underway. This is an important aspect of the overall construction.”



Kriengsak Trilerklith

After that, a meeting was held with the villagers to let them know the work was getting underway, the start and finish points, how much time would be taken and which contractors would be hired. The villagers were responsible for coordinating and providing progress reports in the meetings, and whenever they encountered problems regarding the construction they were able to discuss issues and seek advice and solutions. We want the community to be able to run the project themselves in the future so they have to be able to use the tools and techniques of construction properly, he said.



Sricha Hirun, project engineer and another volunteer of Thai Oil Group who has devoted his energies to the welfare of the villagers, said that one thing he learned whilst working on this project is that all of the villagers here are keen to develop their community to its full potential and improve their quality of life. He noticed an



Sricha Hirun

enthusiasm among all the villagers to help and a strong willingness to support the operation, from the commencement of the project to its completion. But the thing that impressed him the most was the kindness shown by the villagers towards the team.

“Despite the distance and the limited time we had spare for the villagers we had to work consistently. We have gained lots of knowledge from working at the refinery and sharing this creates a good balance. It made us feel that our efforts had not been in vain. I'd like everyone in the team to have a chance to do this; to apply what we know, and to experience the happiness of giving in return.”



Communities with knowledge and capabilities lead to economic development, creation of jobs, and local career development. This in turn reverses the trend of migration out of the community and brings lasting contentment. It also helps protect the environment by conserving water resources and promotes living with the sufficiency economy philosophy at its core.

