

“Case studies of improving the conditions at urban slum and poor rural community”

SIKKA ASIA FOUNDATION (SAF) in Bangkok, Thailand

Outline of SAF:

SAF is an international NGO to support urban slum and poor rural communities in Thailand, by building libraries and nursery schools, and offering scholarships and job training. They focus their activities in three Bangkok slums, as well as the poorest provinces of Surin Province in Northeastern Thailand, and Loei and Payao Provinces in Northern Thailand. SAF is supported by Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) in Tokyo, Japan, which used to be called So-To Zen Buddhists International Volunteer Association until 1999. What initiated the establishment of SVA was the massive flow of refugees from Indochina in 1979. SVA's activities focus on the diffusion of education and cultural activities in urban slums and rural communities of Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. SVA is also active in the activities of picture book distribution in Japan, global citizen education project, the Great Hanshin Earthquake Restoration project, Craft-aid project, etc.

Actual cases of improving urban slum and poor rural community

SAF is an NGO to support poverty-stricken people in urban Bangkok slums, and rural communities in northeastern Thailand through the provision of libraries, nursery schools, scholarships, job training, drug prevention activities etc. SAF's principle policy in supporting poor people is “to live and learn together,” with thorough coordination with slum resident organizations to address and resolve various problems pertaining to the daily life of such communities, together. As SAF's main field of activities is in education and cultural development, it will take a long time to materialize their result. Still, a slum girl, who studied in a slum library donated from Japan 15 years ago, was able to enter the National Chulalongkorn University, in 1998, one of Thailand's best universities that has been the hardest to enter. Today, we find more girls and boys following her example, and the activities are finally producing fruits.

1. Background and history:

- (i) The year 1979 saw the mass of refugees fleeing from Indochina, and the Soto Zen South East Asian Refugee Rescue Conference, which changed the name to SVA in

1999, was established then for a purpose of supporting refugee camps. Since the start of the organization, it has pursued educational and cultural aid activities at refugee camps, such as building libraries, printing and publishing.

(ii) After the close of refugee camps, the organization shifted its focus to the cooperation in the development and recovery of Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Currently in Thailand, the SVA continues to provide educational and cultural support activities in cooperation and coordination with SAF (established in 1991).

(iii) SAF's activities cover broad areas including three urban slums in Bangkok (Kong Toey with 100,000 people, Suanphlu with 7,000 residents, and Chuaplern with 6,000 people), and the poorest rural communities in Surin, Loei, and Payao provinces in Northeastern and Northern Thailand.

2. Purpose:

(i) To assist the poverty-stricken communities in their efforts to alleviate from poverty, prevent juvenile crimes, help people to earn self-supportive capability, and offer educational opportunities to children with no educational privilege due to poverty, by offering library services, nursery schools, scholarship aids, professional training, drug and chemical dependence prevention, etc.

(ii) Moreover, SAF provides the opportunities for Asian children, including Japanese children, to have mutual and international exchanges, to respect each other's country, ethnic group, and culture, and to contemplate on the poverty alleviation issue in developing countries, thereby contributing to the realization of peaceful society in the future.

3. Contents and achievements of SAF activities:

(i) A library in Suanphlu slum was donated by Japan 15 years ago. A girl living in this slum, who went to this library every day, won the grand prize in All Thai French Speech Contest in her 12th grade, and passed the entrance examination of National Chularokhorn University in 1998, which is considered the most difficult university in Thailand to enter. She also passed Thailand's diplomat training test in her freshman year against the one in 100 competition rate, and currently receiving diplomat training in Russia. There are many girls and boys following her example. This is truly a fruit of SAF's continuous activities.



- (ii) Today, about 120 groups and 1500 people from Japan visit SAF's Bangkok Office in a year, providing wonderful opportunity for Japanese people, especially high school students to think about their lives.
- (iii) Libraries were built for one in each slum and they have about 25000 books in total. SAF also built a library each in Sensai Village of Payao Province, Baan Sawai Village of Surin Province, and Chieng Khan County of Loei Province. In addition, there is a mobile library servicing Bangkok.
- (iv) SAF's construction of nursery schools was for four schools, three in rural villages and one in Suanphlu. These schools set higher priorities in accepting the children of one-parent homes, and low-income families. They have achieved considerable progress in lifestyle education, welfare and hygiene, and nutritional balance. At the same time, the building of nurseries has enabled parents to work without worrying about their children. In case of minority children, the nurseries also provide them with the opportunity to learn Thai language before entering primary school, thereby mitigating any potential handicap in languages.
- (v) In SAF's scholarship program, total 480 people in 3 Bangkok slums and rural villages in above three and neighboring provinces received scholarships in 1999. There are two types of scholarships in this program, a general scholarship and urgent support scholarship offered at the time of economic recession. The urgent support scholarships are to support children when their parents are ill or have had accidents, and the objective is to ensure that parental job loss will not lead children

to give up schooling. In 1999, about 100 children received urgent support scholarships. Children in an age group of primary school pupil to college student are eligible for these scholarships. In terms of gender difference, more girls are receiving scholarships than boys are, since they are more likely to be deprived of educational opportunity as they are forced to work at home, or away from home, even to prostitute.

- (vi) SAF is operating three student dormitories for children who cannot commute to schools due to long distance between their villages and schools. The dormitories are for students of junior high schools and high schools. Altogether, these three facilities house about 80 children.
- (vii) Craft project based on Thailand's traditional crafts is ongoing at Klong Toey Professional Training Center and by a group of ladies in Sensaai Village. The project aimed to improve women's status in a society, to increase their income, and to raise their consciousness.
- (viii) As SAF's professional training project, training courses in printing, sawing, leather crafting are ongoing in Klong Toey slum for women, handicapped, and youth.
- (ix) The Clean and Green Project to improve slum condition started for three Bangkok slum areas in July, 1998. Project activities include the collecting of recyclable wastes (glass bottles, plastic bottles, metals, etc.), and exchanging them with flower and shrub seedlings to decorate slum pathways, in order to improve the slum landscape. By eliminating wastes scattered around slum pathways, and introducing flowerbeds, the project successfully improved slum environment and received favorable comments. (The project once received mass media coverage for five consecutive weeks.)
- (x) Other SAF activities include a campaign to prevent drug and chemical stimulant use, food hygiene project, Asia Children's Cultural Festival, Indochina's Mutual Exchange of GO and NGO Experiences, Asian Storytelling Study, etc.

4. Factors for success:

- (i) The basic policy of SAF in its support for low income families is "to learn and live together" and SAF has actually promoted its activities by earning their trusts, cooperating with slum resident organizations, and counseling them on their daily living problems.
- (ii) SAF activities focus on education and culture, so that its achievement will take a long time to materialize. Yet, it succeeded in its mission by emphasizing the

self-sustenance and self-reliance of community members and by holding a future vision to improve the fundamentals.

- (iii) SAF's success was also founded on its extensive knowledge in legislature and administrative works as well as its ability to advise and coordinate poverty alleviation efforts between low-income people and government.
- (iv) Furthermore, SAF's ability to tentatively shoulder some administrative services, such as nursery school management.

5. What we learned:

- (i) It is important for anyone to think in a way that there should be someone who can understand him/her no matter how poor he/she is, and to maintain own pride. In such a way, one can prevent dropping out of a social ladder. In order to sustain such sense, the provision of an opportunity to learn in libraries and nursery schools from early ages will be essential
- (ii) It will be vital for both aid-giving and aid-recipient sides to maintain the posture of "to live and learn together" while sharing issues, responsibilities and trusts.
- (iii) Poverty is often a product of social structure. It will be important for us to nurture human resources that can think things, make judgements, and solve problems by themselves.

6. Impressions:

- (i) SAF's projects supplement many social aspects where administration cannot and will not fully reach the individuals, such as nursery projects, scholarship aid projects, etc. At the same time, its activities lead not only to temporary relief aids but also to fundamental improvement activities to let future generations develop solid social and global vision.
- (ii) Today, Thailand has a new constitution effective of 1997, and the favorable environment to promote democracy in Thailand is developing in a full swing. We sincerely hope that SAF and SVA activities will benefit the future of Thailand.

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