

The Farmers' Dialogue

All of us who had the privilege of visiting Thailand in November find ourselves especially affected by the news of the tsunami in South East Asia. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those involved.

We met at Chiang Mai University in Northern Thailand, a refreshing country where leaders express confidence in and a vision for their farmers as food producers. Universal issues arise when farmers meet, no matter which country they come from. A common priority is obtaining an adequate return for their produce in the market place. How the climate in all parts of the world is changing, with differing effects is of great concern. Organic farming is another lively issue. It was encouraging to see the scientific research taking place in Thailand, creating a greater understanding of organic pest control and plant food, and offering an alternative to a system that relies so heavily on manufactured chemical inputs.

The title of the Chiang Mai Farmers' Dialogue reflects the world outreach of farming. It comes from a document produced by the United States Corn Growers' Association, representing farmers who are offering a sustainable market structure robust enough to stand the stress and strain of the 21st century.

This Farmers' Dialogue was launched on the note of global issues affecting agriculture and the importance of learning from each other. Thailand places much importance in its farming sector and this provided a healthy setting for the discussions. Dr Chamaiporn Tanomsridejchai from the Dept of Agricultural Extension in Bangkok gave a vivid picture of the policy of the extension service and the areas where they are making changes. She spoke of their determination to improve farmers' efficiency by building on their initiatives and creating a strategy that would reverse the flow of educated people leaving the land. She pinpointed overlapping government department activities and the need for extension workers to change their role and philosophy to serve farmers needs. Thailand has opened up to free trade and aims to become the world's kitchen. It is already feeling the effects of cheaper food products being imported from China where input costs are lower. The agricultural faculty that hosted the dialogue has very close links with farmers and an understanding of the issues they face, resulting in research projects that directly benefit the farming community. During the dialogue we heard of many developments: Chomchuan Boonrahong of the Institute of Sustainable Farming Communities reported that nearly 1000 families in the north are now applying the principle of sustainable farming and selling their produce through farmers' markets. This represents a trend away from chemicals and mono-cropping to mixed farming and local markets. Every Thai we spoke to takes heart from the leadership of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. We heard some of the King's philosophy expounded by Dr Sumeth Tantiveskul, Secretary of the Chaipattana Foundation. For 58 years the King has developed royal projects, each well researched and maintained. These projects now total more than 3000; 90% are concerned with agriculture, self-sufficiency is seen as the foundation of national life and stability.



Farmers' Dialogue venue



Duncan Nduhui (Kenya) Jamil Ssebalu
(Uganda) Martin Simtenda (Tanzania)

In the course of the nine-day programme the participants inspected 10 farms and agricultural projects and visited cultural sites. During the three-day dialogue we were given an outline of Thai agricultural policy and farming conditions as well as perspectives from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, India, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Canada, Germany, Australia, France and the UK. As we learned more about each other a picture emerged of people from many different backgrounds and histories united by a common love of farming, ways of the countryside and concern for the consumers. This raised the hope that when our purpose is adequate our divisions can be overcome. Farmers respond to the task and responsibility to feed everyone on our planet in a sustainable and permanent way. Keo Salath from Cambodia summed the atmosphere up well when he said, searching for the right English, but with clear conviction, "This should be called the farmers' Transformation Dialogue, because it has everything - new ways of farming, ideology and how to live together".

The Huai Hong Khrai Royal Development Study Centre is one of the King's projects. It covers a large hilly area north of Chiang Mai, in an area where 40 years ago the trees had been felled by a British company to provide material for the extension of the railway. This heavy logging changed the terrain so much that people could only live in this barren area for a few months of the year. The King's project has reclaimed the area through reforestation and careful water management and is now a living demonstration area for nine types of farming that are appropriate to that part of the country, including fish farming, forestry, vegetables, frog production, dairy and mushroom farming.



One of eight reservoirs Huai Hong Khrai

On Rainbow farm, a small experimental farm, we saw hands-on work developing and adapting farming methods that reduce outside inputs, providing home produced fertiliser and pest control methods that sustained yields to a level expected when applying chemicals. A careful study had identified that some of the chemicals used in standard production methods undermined the natural balance of pests and predators. The land produced two crops per year, rice and soya beans. One aspect of their management system is the control of the large snails that damage the rice crops by using ducks. These ducks were fed a product containing EM (Essential Micronutrients) The result was that their droppings

in the rice paddy fields produced green nitrogen-fixing algae thus supplying nutrients required by the rice. The name of the farm came about as two men, one Thai and the other Japanese, who were considering how to support this kind of work, saw a rainbow and named the property after it. These men are studying local farming methods and experimenting how to make them work better.

On another project we saw an example of how to turn a waste product into valuable animal feed and other saleable products. In this case it was mustard seed that had had the oils extracted. The owner, with the university's help, had found ways to make it acceptable to cattle through adding rice bran and waste from a flour mill. For pigs he had discovered that a mixture of mustard waste, by-products from the flour mill, rice bran and water hyacinth in balanced proportions reduced flies and the smell from the manure, an ideal solution for pigs kept near towns. He also found ways to produce pest repellent, animal feed, mustard sauce, a cleansing agent, bio diesel, cooking oil, massage oil and cosmetics, all from the same by-product. Many left that farm wondering what products they would find in their own countries that are currently being thrown away but which could be productively used.



Prawit Tantawee Manager Lanna Products



Mitsamphan pigs

North of Chiang Mai we saw how through the leadership of a Christian church minister, and the help of Heifer International, destitute refugee farmers from Myanmar had become established farmers. Heifer International provided financial loans managed by a newly-formed farmers' co-operative, freeing the farmers from the money-lenders who charged 10% per month. The loan structure was imaginative: 15% interest was charged, 6% of this went back to Heifer International and the rest to the co-operative, who used it with the 10 Baht per month membership charge to build a community centre, a water storage tank and provide loans for agricultural inputs. 76 Mitsamphan pigs, a cross between Duroc, Jersey and Meishan, were also donated, along with training for the owners in nutrition and health.

We spent a day near Lamphun where we were entertained by the Umong Municipality which supports the local farmers. We talked with some of them and were brought face to face with the commitment and knowledge that made farming so productive. During the collapse of the economy in 1997 the government had decided to localise the management of agriculture and encourage local ventures, especially those that added value to farm products, in this case making wine from longan fruit. In the afternoon we saw a project supported by the Faculty of Agriculture Chiang Mai University, to save the local Lamphun cattle, a small very hardy animal, not renowned for either meat or milk production but offering value when crossed with European breeds that are not able to stand the local climate. As we arrived a large group of school children were talking with local farmers as part of their education. From there we moved with them to a demonstration where an African grass was being planted in an empty rice paddy-field, the grass was to provide extra feed for cattle.



Lamphun cattle

"I thought we were the only farmers with that problem?" This is the most common remark made when farmers from different countries meet and exchange experiences. The fact that many of our problems are similar may point to similar solutions. Perhaps the item at the top of the list is the farmers' battle to get an honourable price for their products.

After all we saw and discussed, the following points remain as areas of concern:

- a) To structure markets and farmers' groups to ensure an honourable return for all in the food chain.
- b) To face up to changing weather patterns and falling water tables and take decisive action.
- c) To find ways to make farming attractive to the younger generation.
- d) To retain the farmers' freedom in a world of agribusiness, supermarkets and official regulations.
- e) To focus on the task of feeding everyone which can be a unifying purpose in a very divided world.

Part of the effectiveness of the occasion is illustrated by the actions delegates were planning to take when they returned home: the three Africans are hoping to hold a series of day events near Kampala; Shailendra Mahato is planning to arrange a Farmers' Dialogue in the autumn of 2005 in his state of Jharkand in the North East of India; others will be arranging exchange visits, some of these between places of agricultural education.

Throughout the time in Thailand we saw initiatives that had been started by individuals or groups and we had evidence from other parts of the world of similar actions. This strengthened the conviction that what each of us does can help create the future we most long for. In summing up at the end of the Dialogue, our host, Assoc. Prof Puntipa Pongpiachan commented on the experiences of those involved in 'Initiatives of Change' and said "I am very impressed by the speeches given by farmers who have shared their experiences. I can confidently say that this dialogue has enlightened our thinking, leading to new solutions. The voice of a young Cambodian lady who asked for more Thai-Cambodian dialogue to improve the understanding between our two nations is a very good example of what has been started. I hope government officers together with politicians from both sides will use this opportunity too find solutions. This idea can lead to a solution to the conflict in Southern Thailand."

We hope this report will give you a glimpse of the Thai experience. Anyone wanting more information should contact the person named at the end of this document.

All of those involved in the Dialogue want to pass on our sincerest thanks to the sponsors, the Faculty of Agriculture Chiang Mai University, Northern NASTDA and those who gave the gifts, large and small, that made this Farmers' Dialogue in Thailand possible.