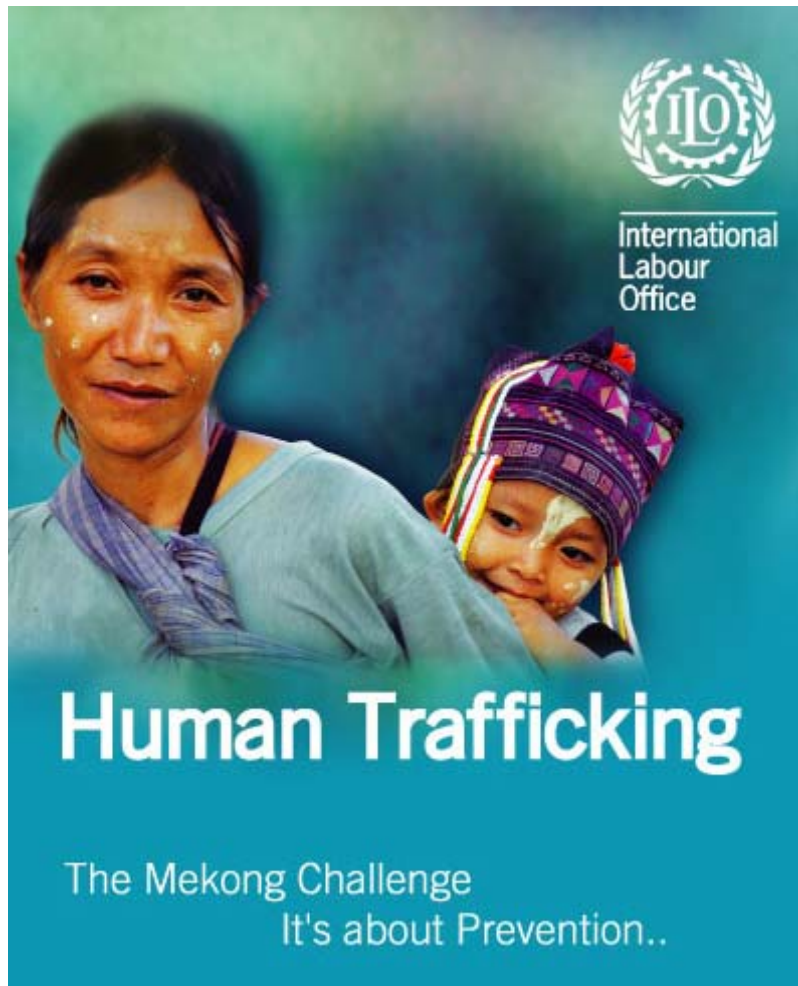


Models from northern Thailand on trafficking prevention through economic and social empowerment



A WORLD OF OPTIONS

How promoting tourism contributed towards prevention of human trafficking in five hill tribe villages

THE GOOD PRACTICE: Reducing vulnerabilities to human trafficking in hill tribe communities by promoting local tourism; building trust among villagers and an understanding of their way of life and empowering ethnic villagers to manage for themselves new types of income-generating projects – and in the process, helping villagers develop renewed pride in their cultural identity and themselves. Though many young people still leave to work elsewhere, they leave fully informed on the risks and how to protect themselves.

The Mirror Art Foundation and its hill tribe development project

THE INITIAL CHALLENGE: In the late 1990s and troubled by what they saw as a huge divide between rural and urban cultures, a group of Bangkok-based youth running a mobile children's theatre moved their commitment to social change to a remote corner of Thailand in Chiang Rai province. "Hill tribe people feel being hill tribe is a disadvantage," noted Sombat Boon-ngam-anong of the Mirror Art Foundation (MAF, formerly known as the Mirror Art Group). Their ambition was to bring both economic and social opportunities to some 14 villages (50 subvillages) and thus raise education levels, income and self-esteem among both adults and young people.

Muang district in northern Chiang Rai province, near Burma, is home to Akha and Lahu hill tribe people who have long struggled with national identity issues (one in six do not have Thai citizenship), access to education, land rights, food security, deforestation and cultural pride – all negative conditions making them very vulnerable to human trafficking and for labour and sexual exploitation.

THE PROCESS: MAF members began to build trust with the community by relocating their own homes there and then opening a day care centre for very young children and a computer learning centre for older ones. They created a database that contained information on every child in the targeted area, including their health histories and identity card status. They introduced e-commerce to the villagers by establishing a website where they could peddle the miniature ceramic bird whistles and embroidered bags and clothing they made. They taught young people how to use video and digital photography to record their own histories and culture from their perspective and in their languages.

To further encourage cross-cultural respect, they asked friends from the city to join them and live in with local families. Then they advertised on their website for visitors from around Thailand and abroad to "home stay" with an ethnic family to learn about the local everyday way of life. The idea also aimed to change young hill tribe people's outlook of themselves and their world.

WITH ILO SUPPORT: Understanding the need to improve family incomes as well as creating an environment devoid of a "dead-end" aura, the ILO, through its Mekong project to combat trafficking in children and women (ILO/TICW), sought to work with the Mirror Art Foundation to expand on its home-stay project as an income-earning venture. They aimed to strengthen the livelihood skills of community members, including those aged 15–18, so they could improve their self-reliance; they offered scholarships or help in transferring to new schools to children at risk of trafficking and exploitation.

Beginning in 2002, MAF and ILO/TICW staff relied on participatory analysis to identify community strengths and weaknesses, resources and potential for eco-tourism, both

physical/geographical and cultural. Next, they surveyed the local tourism market to ensure that the planned home-stay and other initiatives were feasible. Then they discussed with community members about the potential risks and benefits of promoting eco-tourism – before seeking a consensus to go ahead with the venture.

That began a series of capacity-building activities with community members: 1) visits to other hill tribe communities to learn from their experiences in eco-tourism; 2) exposure visits to the heavily touristed Chiang Mai city to see what goods (such as handicrafts) were marketable and to stay in hotels to experience demanded standards of service and cleanliness, and to the world heritage site Luang Prabang in Lao PDR to learn more about eco-tourism; and 3) training local people to serve as tourist guides.

Skills training was provided to the tour guides, handicraft groups and other involved groups on English language and communication skills, cooking, marketing, bookkeeping, product designs sanitation and other general hospitality services.

There also was awareness raising on gender issues, women’s rights and children’s rights. For youth, life skills and basic vocational skills were offered to increase their self-esteem as well as sense of belonging to the community. This included life planning, savings strategy, rationalization-making choices and decision making, communication skills (listening, speaking and explaining), basic legal rights and telephoning skills.

HOW THE HOME-STAY BUSINESS WORKS: Most tourists find the home-stay opportunity through the Internet, at www.hilltribetour.com. Others are directed there because they have contacted directly with MAF as volunteers and/or friends. Tourists stay anywhere from one night to a week. Before leaving, they fill out an evaluation form indicating what they liked and didn’t like and why they bought any product (price, design, textile, construction, etc.).

OUTCOMES:

- ◆ Some 192 families (690 people) now take in tourists into their home for a fee, increasing their income. The total income from the project including home stay, tour guide and handicrafts, increased from 1.2 million baht in 2003 to 1.8 million in 2004 – a 50 percent increase.
- ◆ Males and females aged 18–25 were trained as local tour guides, using a local tour guide curriculum that was developed by MAF and certified by the Department of Sport and Tourism. The Tourism Authority of Thailand in Chiang Rai province has so far licensed 37 local tour guides of Akha and Lahu ethnicity who were trained under the project.
- ◆ Young community tour volunteers aged 13–16 have increased their life skills and sense of pride in their local community and culture through participation in the study trips.
- ◆ Women learned how to manage a home-stay business.
- ◆ 32 village committees, community leaders, teachers, housewives groups and youth have been sensitized on trafficking issues.
- ◆ MAF was invited to join a provincial committee to develop the tourist management protocol for Chiang Rai. A MAF representative was invited to be a resource person at different meetings in Thailand on such issues as socially responsible tourism, ways to prevent tourists from engaging in unethical actions and preventing child sex tourism.
- ◆ Awareness-raising camps were established. Two camps, one with Japanese volunteers and the other with Singaporeans, engaged children in games, activities and information sharing about the prevention and fight against trafficking. In another one-month summer camp, with Canadian volunteers, children also learned English. Thirty youth and villagers received English training.
- ◆ Computer training is available every Saturday for youth and adults.

HOW THE VILLAGES CHANGED: Through the enhanced home-stay project, villagers have learned to work together, and women have started to play more important roles in the community. The e-commerce and tourist earnings have improved the economic security, and fewer children have left home in the past two years. According to an independent evaluation, those who did migrate “left fully aware of the risk factors” and thus, hopefully, less vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. Those who leave take with them information and contact details for agencies and people who can help them. There have been no reports of trafficking from these five villages.

MAF has worked to build the capabilities of the villagers to manage the different projects themselves. The management is done by community groups based on different occupations: home stay, fish farming, volunteers, culture and performances, and weaving and basketry. Through these groups, villagers learn to participate meaningfully and thus to protect community members. For example, they created a code of conduct for tourists and decided that families with daughters would receive only female tourists and that young women will not provide body massage services for tourists. And they established security volunteers in their communities to look after the safety of tourists as well as themselves. MAF is still responsible for overseeing the website and networking

with commercial outlets for selling products and attracting tourists and with the government.

The flow of outsiders into the community has left the hill tribe villagers with a re-affirmed sense of identity and pride. Telling interested outsiders about their culture and ways of living caused young people's self-esteem to blossom and tales from the outside world motivated them to want to learn more and thus continue as long as possible with their education. This has also translated to pride in their immediate environment. While known for living in unhygienic conditions prior to the home-stay development, they have learned from necessity that to grow a tourist business they need to clean their immediate environment and maintain healthy conditions, considered to be a major achievement.

The constant awareness raising on migration and risks have made communities (parents and those who leave) more aware of trafficking issues, both in Thailand and abroad, where to go if they need help and what they shouldn't do.

ONGOING CHALLENGES:

- ◆ National identity issues remain a challenge directly or indirectly to education and employment access, mobility, land rights, etc.
- ◆ Enough decent jobs within the communities are lacking, making young people prone to migration.
- ◆ Thirty percent of students drop out of school between grades 7 and 9, and only 40 percent continue beyond grade 9. Some children cannot afford to continue their education and drop out to work.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- ◆ Sustainable income-generation projects work best when existing skills in a community are utilized and enhanced, rather than introducing totally new skills. In this case, the MAF had a long-term working experience with the community and with home-stay tourism. And the communities had the attractions within their everyday existence that appeal to a new trend of tourists – those looking for meaningful adventures.
- ◆ Experience is the best teacher. MAF did not need to impose English training on villagers. They waited for tourists to come and when the villagers realized they wanted a way to communicate with people from many different countries, they asked for English tutoring.
- ◆ The evaluation forms help strengthen villagers' management skills. Having tourists indicate what they like and don't like provides valuable market analysis to villagers who can then make adjustments in their product design or management. When home-stay visitors commented in the evaluation form about the poor hygiene, the villagers realized they needed to better care for the local environment.
- ◆ Community development doesn't try to make new cultures but empower people to take pride in their way of life and how they can use it to sustain themselves.
- ◆ Market survey/analysis and/or feasibility study must be conducted before making any decisions on what income-earning venture to pursue.

- ◆ Project staff must be properly skilled to facilitate participation of the target group and fully prepared to step back and encourage the villagers take control of planning and managing in order to establish full ownership.

As a MAF staff member has noted, “We activists need to understand the nature, the way of life and the culture of the target groups that we work with. Especially the ethnic groups who have a very specific character. We have to realize that we do not go to their communities in order to change their identity. We have to respect all these things that make up their identity, their community and their ethnicity.”

More information and features regarding the community tourism are available in English on www.learnfromhilltribe.com and www.hilltribetour.com

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