

Situation of Volunteering and Roles of different sectors in promoting volunteerism in Thailand

*Supparat Rattanamuk**

I. Situation of Volunteering in Thailand:

The Thai word for ‘volunteerism’ is generally given as ‘Asasamak’, which means willing to do something by offering himself/herself without the need for anything in return. Beside ‘Asasamak’ there are other words used to describe the expression of volunteerism. ‘Aur-fue-pue-prae’ (generosity), ‘Mettra’ (kindness), ‘Karuna’ (mercy), ‘Karnhai’ (give) and ‘Jit-asa’ (volunteer spirit) are used in the sense of giving with kindness without expecting a reward. Another word of Thai volunteerism that reflects mutual aid among the community members is the common Thai phrase ‘Karn-chuei-lua-ker-kual-kan’ (to give a hand for assistance). All these words can be literally translated as ‘willing to do something by offering himself/herself with kindness without expecting a reward’.

Volunteerism has long been a way of life in Thailand. There are 2 major social foundations supporting volunteerism in Thailand: Buddhism and mutual aid culture.

* Associate Professor, the Graduate Volunteer Centre of Thammasat University.

1. Buddhism and Volunteerism

Almost all religions influence people's beliefs and behavior; and all seem to encourage them to love and service each other. This is also the case with Thai Buddhists for whom Buddhism plays an important role in encouraging and sustaining volunteering. The majority of Thais are Buddhists who believe in 'Karma'. One who makes good Karma in a former life will have good life in the present. On the contrary, the present life contains suffering if one performs bad Karma. As the saying goes 'Good deeds beget good results, while bad deeds beget bad results;' or 'He that sows good seed shall reap good corn'. Individuals have to discover and keep their Karma, which is done through merit making (giving of alms, donating and helping to renovate temples, and organizing temple festivities such as funerals, marriages, celebrations). Volunteering and giving behavior is also supported by the 'Sanghawattu 4' principle. 2 out of 4 pillars of the Sangahawattu principle are 'Tann' or giving and 'Uttajariya' or being useful for public interest. Another principle is called 'Bhomvihran 4,' which supports the volunteerism of Buddhist Thai. 2 out of 4 pillars of the Bhomviharn principle are 'Metra,' or good wish to others in the normal situation, and 'Karuna,' or wishing to release and relief others' suffering in their trouble time. The Buddhist temples have been the center of gathering for giving and volunteering activities from past till present. Last Tsunami tragedy, temples were used as focal points and relief centers to help the victims. Various items of living necessities were donated to victims via the temples. Also, Buddhist temples function as the educational institutions that teach and train people about volunteering and giving.



2. Mutual Aid Tradition

Thai people have a unique volunteering practice through the agricultural production cycle and community living. People live together, sharing and caring for the business of other community members. They have ‘Loung-Kaek’ tradition, in which people assist their neighbors in rice harvesting, and the others assist them in return. This mutual aid is the dominant system of social and economic support for rural communities. Thai people join the community funeral to support the cousins of the dead spiritually and financially. Many houses in rural communities have small to medium jars in front of their houses to serve the thirsty passing walkers. These pictures reflect the culture and tradition of ‘Karn-Chuei-lua-Ker-kual-kan’ and ‘Namjaimaitree,’ or willingness to serve. It is also a common practice for young people to take care of older family members while neighbors take care of older neighbors. This phenomenon can be considered as a traditional and unwritten social welfare in Thai rural society. Some communities have established informal volunteer committees. These committees are responsible for conserving and utilizing the natural resources sustainability. The committee for irrigation and the committee for community forestry are good cases of voluntary groups to volunteer in managing the common resources.

We can see that voluntary activities and volunteer spirit are already within the basis of religion and in social and traditional aspects of Thai society. If these activities were more promoted and supported by the Government policy within an institutional framework, they will eventually yield more sustainable developments.

The Thai government declared the Declaration on Thai Volunteers on 16th October 2001, to commemorate the 2001 International

Year of Volunteer (IYV 2001). The definition of volunteer in the Declaration refers to any person who voluntarily participates in assisting other people, preventing and tackling problems, and promoting social progress not for the sake of remuneration. This definition is on the same track of United Nations Volunteers that the volunteerism refers to “a form of social behaviour undertaken freely which benefits the community and society at large as well as the volunteer, and which is not driven by financial considerations”¹.

In accordance with the Social Welfare Service Promotion Act (2546, B.E.), ‘the volunteer’ refers to a person who volunteers to assist in servicing social welfare activity of ‘the social welfare service organization’. The social welfare service organization refers to the Government organization or a registered non-government organization that provides social welfare services by this Act. Thus, the volunteer defined by this Act refers to a person who chooses to assist in servicing social welfare activity of the Government social welfare organizations or assist in servicing social welfare activity of the registered non-government organizations. The reason for limiting the scope of volunteer under this Act is to allow the Government to support the registered voluntary organizations and their volunteers. This makes the meaning of volunteer narrower than the common understanding.

II. Evolution of trends of volunteerism in Thailand

The evolution of formal volunteering in Thailand is possibly classified by changing periods of Thai socio-politic dimensions. The changing periods are divided into 5 following periods:

¹ UNDP/UNV, Developing a Volunteer Infrastructure: A Guidance Note,” p. 6.



First period (1892-1931): Thailand was ruled under the Monarchy system. The elites foresaw that Thailand should have a charitable organization, as did the Western countries, to help the wounded soldiers and victims during the war. The Red Cross Council was established since 1893. This is the first Non-Government organization to have volunteers relieving and helping the victims under the patronage of His Majesty.

Second period (1932-1973): Thailand changed her political system from Monarchy to Democracy in 1932. In the beginning, the Government officials were very powerful and influential in governing the country. Volunteering was developed and directed into relieving forms. Thai people were perceived by the government sector as too weak, poor, and illiterate to help themselves. The government only had enough resources and personnel for looking after the population's problem. The Government was normally expected to act like a parent of her population. The same perception was given towards the king; he was respected as the father of all people in this country. This led to client-patron relationships between the officials and the clients. A few number of NGOs, such as the National Council for Social Welfare of Thailand (1960), the Plan Parenthood Association of Thailand (1969), Ruamkatanyo Foundation (1970), etc., were established in this period and mostly worked in relieving styles.

Nonetheless, some distinguished scholars were aware of the big difference between rural and urban society during the end of this period. While there was a shortage of materials and high educated persons in rural areas, all were clustered in the cities. The university graduates seemed to ignore the rural situation. Dr. Puey Ungphakorn, former

president of Thammasat University, and his colleagues from educational professions decided to initiate the Graduate Volunteer programme under Thammasat University in 1969. This is a service-learning programme unique in Thailand; it helps the students or volunteers to see their service in the larger context of social justice and social policy rather than simply charity. It is now under the responsibility of the Graduate Volunteer Center (GVC) of Thammasat University. The programme is not solely concerned with academic study; rather it strives to make an active contribution to volunteering and rural development. The graduate volunteers have to study in the classroom for one semester and then spend seven months in a development project in a rural community. After returning from the village, they have to write a mini-thesis based on their community service. Through supporting people, the young graduates can learn about social and rural problems and become part of the solution by having a stint as development volunteers. GVC has already produced about a thousand highly motivated volunteers.

Third period (1974-1987): This period started from the uprising of the people and students throwing out the dictatorship leaders. People were very active in political involvement. The degree of democracy was tuned up higher than any past period. Volunteering was extended beyond Government sector; Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and private sectors increased with more important roles in social service volunteering. The youths and students were more interested in volunteering in various forms and organizations. They organized or joined rural development camps during summer break to teach rural kids and/or build some infrastructure. This kind of activities got support from both university and some private companies. Thai Volunteer Service (TVS),



a Thai non-profit development organization, was established in 1980 and focuses on providing development-training services to other Thai NGOs. The primary work of TVS is to train young Thai volunteers and then to match their skills to particular community development programs run by Thai NGOs.

Fourth period (1988-2000): The influx of capitalism covered the country after opening for free trade and investment. Money and materials were of higher value than virtue. Volunteering seemed to be ignored by the majority. People were too busy in making and spending money. Numbers of applicants to be the volunteers in the voluntary agencies, like Thai Volunteer Service and the Graduate Volunteer Centre of Thammasat University, declined tremendously. After the economic bubble broke, the country collapsed to almost zero. Many people were unemployed and the new graduates could not find jobs, allowing the volunteering program to become active once again. The Government, through various ministries, also applied the Graduates volunteering to various programs, such as 'Love to Develop the Hometown Program', 'Mutual Learning to Creating Better Community', 'Graduate Volunteer Supporting Village Fund', etc. These initiatives focused on tackling unemployment and other socio-economic problems among the youths and the new graduates. They also intensified volunteerism. These people got 7,260 Baht. This was equivalent to the newly appointed government officials at the same educational level. Moreover, they could develop themselves with skills recognized by certificates that can be further used for jobs or higher study application.

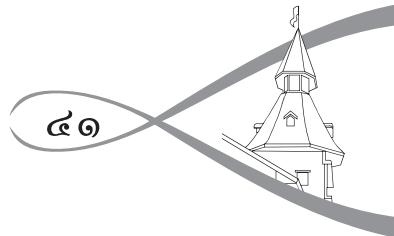
Fifth period (2001-Present): The United Nations General Assembly had designated 2001 the International Year of Volunteer (IYV)

with aims to enhance the importance of voluntary work and encourage people from government and non-government organizations as well as business sectors to promote, upgrade, and strengthen volunteerism at individual, group, and public level. The Thai Cabinet approved the proposal on organizing international Year of Volunteers related activities submitted by the National Commission on Social Welfare on December 19, 2000. Additionally, 21st October, the birthday of Her Royal Highness the King's Mother which is observed annually as Social Work Day, is designated as Thai Volunteer Day. In order to commemorate the International Year of Volunteer and the Thai Volunteer Day, the government, together with non-governmental organizations and volunteers, declared the Declaration on Thai Volunteers to affirm commitment to promote voluntary work and enhance the role of volunteers in providing effective services in the interest of people, society, and nation.

The government has set the Policy on Promoting and Developing Volunteerism in Thailand which is comprised of the following policy guidelines:

(1) Promote and support volunteers by enhancing their knowledge, skills, spirit, and ethics to encourage them to play active roles in providing welfare services, preventing and tackling social problems, social development, organization development, and supporting national security.

(2) Enhance and support the administrative management of volunteer work so that the government and non-governmental organizations that have volunteers will be able to manage volunteer work effectively and efficiently.



(3) Set up the National Voluntary Organization by appointing the National Committee on Promotion and Coordination of the Volunteer Work, comprised of the representatives of concerned government and non-government organizations and volunteers. The committee is responsible for the formulation of policies and programs, promoting, supporting, coordinating, following up, and evaluating volunteer work.

(4) Promote and establish volunteer training institutions both at national and provincial level.

(5) Set up volunteer centers at various levels to function as volunteer information network and matching system.

(6) Produce manuals for volunteers enabling them to work effectively for the benefit of people, society, and country.

(7) Publicize volunteer work in order to increase recognition among government and non-government organizations and the public.

(8) Provide welfare, enhance morale, and recognize the outstanding volunteers and organizations; encourage government and private employees to undertake volunteering without considering day leave.

(9) Provide support for organizing volunteering activities to commemorate Thai Volunteer Day at various levels to promote roles and significance of volunteering.

(10) Raise awareness of voluntarism among children, youth, people, politicians, employees of government and private sectors.

(11) Enact legislation or regulations to recognize volunteers' status and to protect and enhance effective volunteer work.

(12) Support to establish an autonomous national volunteer council administered by membership voluntary organizations.

In line with the above policy guidelines, many guidelines relating to developing volunteer infrastructure were developed, such as establishing volunteer center, training institution, information system, etc. However, they have not been reached to the implementation stage. None of volunteer infrastructure has been created yet.

The importance of volunteering and volunteer infrastructure was discussed again after the Tsunami tragedy. The Tsunami incident killed more than 5,000 Thai and foreign tourists in the Southern provinces on 26th December 2004. Thousands of victims were badly affected as never before. Sympathy from all around Thailand flowed to the affected areas through troops of volunteers. Some never thought to be volunteers before. Some volunteered to support indirectly by donating money and blood. They also volunteered to be interpreters to help the foreign victims to communicate. After the incident, some voluntary agencies, government organizations, NGOs, and civil society organizations agreed to start systemizing the volunteering network. ‘Jitasa’ or ‘Volunteer Spirit’ has been networked among 25 organizations to strengthen volunteerism among the public for peaceful society.

According to the National Social Welfare Office, Thailand has about 9.6 million volunteers: 2.3 million in government sector and 7.3 million in non-government sector, excluding uncollected numbers in informal civil society. It is estimated that there are about 4.5 million volunteers serving in informal civil society². There are 340,500 Buddhist monks who can be considered as volunteers in 34,500 temples all over

² Report of National Council on Social Welfare of Thailand, Year 2006, p. 108.



Thailand³. It is estimated that there are 20,000 personnel engaging in other religions.

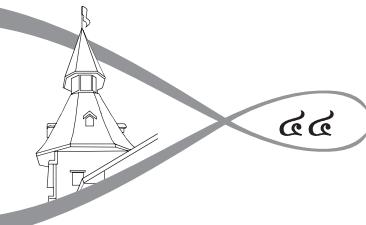
Roles of different sectors in promoting volunteerism

Volunteering is a kind of activity rooted from a person's interest and willingness and based on altruism and pro-social behavior. The more volunteering activities and involvement that occur in our society, the more good things will follow. Therefore, all sectors should join hands to promote and support the volunteerism movement. Each sector may have different important roles in promoting volunteerism. Government, civil society organizations, religion institutions, and private sector will be focused in this paper.

1. Government

Volunteering has the important role of supporting the government sector through various tasks. This makes the government services become more of value with participation from people. Because of very huge scale of responsibilities, the government cannot carry on all matters. People participation through volunteering will enhance the efficiency of responsibilities. People may involve as environment watchdog, health supporter, crime monitor, etc. Moreover, volunteering also pulls the marginalized people, like the unemployed, the disadvantaged, or the retired, back to have self-esteem by giving them the opportunity of a skill-building and networking which they can further use for their own livelihood and others'.

³ Figure from Office of National Buddhism, collected on December 2005.



At present, the biggest group of active volunteering is the public health, which has 830,147 volunteers under the management of Ministry of Public Health, and the civil disaster protection, which has 556,344 volunteers under the management of Ministry of Interior, serving all around the country⁴. Besides those 2 groups there are many types of government volunteers such as the probation volunteer under the Ministry of Justice, the volunteer for social development and human security under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, the environmental protection volunteer under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, etc.

The government, besides utilizing the volunteers, has also guided and supported volunteering to all sectors as appeared in the Declaration on Thai Volunteers and the Policy on Volunteer Development Work since year 2001. The important roles of the government are as follows:

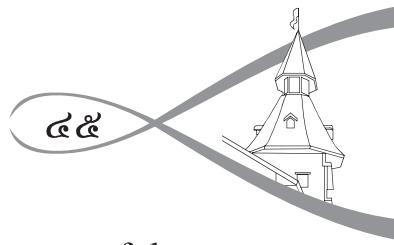
1.1 Promoting a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value

The Government was expected to play the important roles to promote a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value, by this following ways:

(1.1.1) Convene meetings involving the main stakeholders to identify goals and directions of volunteering development of the nation.

(1.1.2) Feature volunteer contributions to national and personal development in public media; by officially linking volunteering

⁴ Report of National Council on Social Welfare of Thailand, Year 2006, p. 108.



with national development direction⁵ such as ‘Volunteering to peaceful and happy society’, ‘Volunteering and national sufficiency economy’, etc.

(1.1.3) Support research and study on volunteering and disseminate the documented findings to general public.

1.2 Establishing and nurturing an enabling environment

The Government may enable and nurture environment of volunteerism by the following ways:

(1.2.1) Feature volunteering to be national agenda for national sufficiency economy and sustainable social development.

(1.2.2) Encourage respective government departments to promote the engagement of their constituencies in volunteer actions without being considered as a leave day and establishing a focal point in ministries for promotion and support of volunteer actions. Also, motivate them with decent incentives to volunteer.⁶

(1.2.3) Create educational curricula under the Ministry of Education relating to volunteerism. Also, design meaningful and attractive volunteering programs and activities integrated into the existing educational programs, e.g., boy scout, national guard, girl guide, etc., with some decent incentives, e.g. equivalent credits, certificate of good deed, etc.

⁵ From the seminar on ‘Volunteering and Giving in Thai Society’, 25 October 2006.

⁶ For example, the cabinet resolution on 14 November 2006, approved to award the public servants who volunteer in helping the flood victims or save the governmental premises by permitting 10 more accumulative vacation days and considering promotion.

(1.2.4) Develop enabling legislation for volunteerism such as tax return for donation, volunteer servicing day permission for employee, one-stop service for VIO's registration⁷.

(1.2.5) Promote special recognition schemes, such as awards for volunteers and volunteer involving organizations (VIOs) that significantly contribute to national development priorities to enhance morale and motivation for volunteers.

1.3 Promoting volunteerism for development

The Government may promote volunteerism for development by the following ways:

(1.3.1) Establish national targets for volunteer participation in various social sectors.

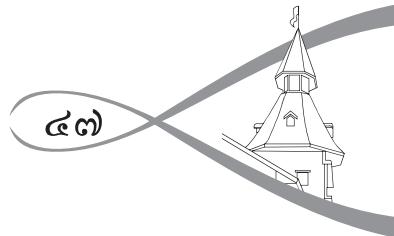
(1.3.2) Promote volunteerism as a mechanism in tackling socio-economic problems through the skill-building and networking projects for the unemployed⁸.

(1.3.3) Create special incentives to engage marginalized groups in volunteering for development, e.g. former drug addicts, people infected with HIV. This can support their self-esteem to live among the others.⁹

⁷ As appeared in the policy on volunteer development work, 2001.

⁸ For example, Graduate Volunteers for Supporting Village Revolving Fund during the economic crisis

⁹ For example, the Ministry of Justice's support of nearly released prisoners volunteering to help the Tsunami victims with the incentive of imprisoned day reduction.



1.4 Developing mechanisms in promoting and supporting volunteerism

The Government may play roles in developing mechanisms to promote and support volunteerism by the following ways:

(1.4.1) Establish or support the national volunteer center and the national committee for volunteerism promotion and coordination, comprising representatives from government, non-government, and civil society organizations and from volunteers and academia, to be responsible in policy-making, planning, supporting, monitoring, and evaluating volunteer related works.¹⁰

(1.4.2) Promote and assist VIOs to improve their organizational and managerial capacity through training and educating in various volunteer administration courses.

(1.4.3) Create the volunteerism training curriculum for various types of volunteers, to support them with knowledge, skill, virtue, and working standards.¹¹

(1.4.4) Support the development of volunteer database system and roster to matching the volunteer and the VIO's needs, both at domestic and international levels. The system will support information management for further study and research as well as policy-making on volunteerism.¹²

¹⁰ From the policy on volunteer development work, 2001.

¹¹ From the policy on volunteer development work, 2001.

¹² From the seminar on 'Volunteering and Giving in Thai Society', 25th October 2006, as well as the policy on volunteer development work, 2001.

1.5 *Ensuring sustainable funding*

The Government may set up a national investment fund for volunteerism for development to cater to common needs of organizations concerned, e.g. training in the management of volunteers, sharing of volunteer experiences and information, and infrastructure for online volunteering. Fund may come from various sources: specific tax, government seed fund, budget allocation, etc.

2. Private Sector

The number of Thai people getting involved in volunteer work has been significantly increasing each year. This includes participation from the business sector. Many private companies have implemented the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) approach in their policies. The private sector may play roles in promoting volunteerism by the following ways:

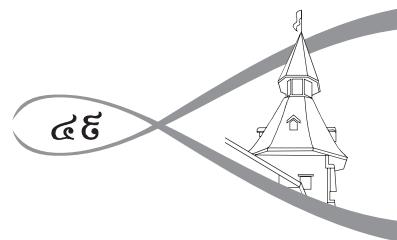
2.1 *Establishing and nurturing an enabling environment*

Private sector may enable and nurture environment of volunteerism by the following ways:

(2.1.1) Promote corporate image through stimulating or engaging the schemes of corporate social responsibility, supporting available resources as well as employees to volunteering.

(2.1.2) Recognize the engagement of employees in volunteering as a part of staff development in the aspect of social development or related duties.¹³

¹³ From the seminar on ‘Volunteering and Giving in Thai Society’, 25 October 2006.



(2.1.3) Contribute award to the best employee volunteer who magnificently contributes to social development; he/she can be a role model for his/her colleagues or people at large.

2.2 Supporting funds and other resources

Private sector may support funds and/or other resources for volunteerism by the following ways:

(2.2.1) Establish a corporate trust fund to promote volunteering activities; this may be in a single company or a group of companies.¹⁴

(2.2.2) Set up a private-sector consortium that would enable the complementary allocation of resources to benefit effective volunteering.

3. Civil Society

Civil society organization (CSO) is increasing its number in Thailand. The growth of this sector can fulfill the gap which the government and private sector are still not able to attain. CSOs may play roles in promoting volunteerism as follows:

3.1 Promoting a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value

The CSO can play the important roles to promote a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value, by this following ways:

¹⁴ As Thai Cement Trust Fund which is implemented by a group of Thai Cement Companies.

(3.1.1) Promote campaigns addressing good will in Thai society in any celebration of special occasion.¹⁵

(3.1.2) Collect and Disseminate knowledge and information about Volunteerism to the public to stimulate further volunteering and good deeds.¹⁶

(3.1.3) Feature volunteer stories to illustrate the potential of each citizen to contribute for volunteering.¹⁷

3.2 Establishing and nurturing an enabling environment

Civil society sector may enable and nurture environment of volunteerism by the following ways:

(3.2.1) Partner with governments and other sectors to make collective volunteer promotion policy.

(3.2.2) Promote civic engagement of young people through appropriate schemes that link volunteering with community development.¹⁸

¹⁵ For example, ‘Volunteering for the King’ organized by Buddhica Network to celebrate the 60th anniversary of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s assessment to the throne. This is intended to raise awareness of Thai Buddhists on the different forms of giving not only through tangible items.

¹⁶ From the seminar on ‘Volunteering and Giving in Thai Society’, 25 October 2006.

¹⁷ For example, case of Police lieutenant Vichai Suriyuth who has planted more than a million trees along the road, and thus, stimulated further volunteering.

¹⁸ As implemented by some CSOs like Thai Volunteer Service, Mirror Foundation, etc.



3.3 Developing mechanisms in promoting and supporting volunteerism

CSOs may play roles in developing mechanisms to promote and support volunteerism by the following ways:

(3.3.1) Promote and facilitate volunteer networks to enable collaboration and cooperation among VIOs.¹⁹

(3.3.2) Support on volunteering management skills and professional training for managers of volunteers.

4. Religions

Religious institutions are very influential to people's mind and behavior. All religions teach people to do good deeds, love, and give to each other. The institutions can play the important roles in promoting volunteerism in society as follows:

4.1 Promoting a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value

Religious institutions can play the important roles to promote a common understanding of volunteerism and a shared appreciation of its value, by this following ways:

(4.1.1) Mobilize public media to present knowledge and understanding of religious principles of kindness, giving, helping and volunteering by prominent religious leaders.

(4.1.2) Design meaningful and attractive religious activities to give the opportunities for people who want to participate as

¹⁹ Some networks have already formed, such as Volunteer Spirit Network, Public Benefit Organization Network, Network of Buddhists for Buddhism and Thai Society (Buddhica), etc.

volunteers and pinpoint that volunteering is one of the various forms of religious giving and donating.

(4.1.3) Create school activities relating to morals, good deeds, volunteering, and giving by encouraging students to involve in learning, exchanging, doing, and volunteering. This will make them more understanding about individual differences, open-mind, and respect.²⁰

4.2 Developing mechanisms in promoting and supporting volunteerism

The religious institutions can promote moral community network among multi-sectors that link family, temple, community, school, and media to socialize moral spirit and behavior, like the network of TzuChi Organizations in Taiwan that do not limit the responsibility only in a temple but extend to social service in various volunteering activities

²⁰ Abbot Paisarn Visarlo, “Religious Community,” Matichon Newspaper, August 20, 2006.