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February 19, 2012

Poverty Assessment in Thailand

Thailand has one of the lowest poverty rates in Asia with a mere 9.6% of the population falling below the poverty line. Most of those still living in poverty remain in the rural villages. Thailand 2011 CIA World Fact Book reports on the Economic overview of Thailand.

With a well-developed infrastructure, a free-enterprise economy, generally pro-investment policies, and strong export industries, Thailand enjoyed solid growth from 2000 to 2008 - averaging more than 4% per year - as it recovered from the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. Thai exports - mostly machinery and electronic components, agricultural commodities, and jewelry - continue to drive the economy, accounting for more than half of GDP. The global financial crisis of 2008-09 severely cut Thailand's exports, with most sectors experiencing double-digit drops. In 2009, the economy contracted 2.2%. In 2010, Thailand's economy expanded 7.6%, its fastest pace since 1995, as exports rebounded from their depressed 2009 level. Anti-government protests during March-May and the country's polarized political situation had - at most - a temporary impact on business and consumer confidence. Although tourism was hit hard during the protests, its quick recovery helped boost consumer confidence to new highs. Moreover, business and investor sentiment remained buoyant as Thailand's stock market grew almost 5% during the three-month period. The economy probably will continue to experience high growth well into 2011.

As most of those in Slum communities within Bangkok live above the poverty line though well below the national average of financial stability it is hard to evaluate the level of poor which they reside in. Through this paper I have identified 5 areas which indicate the level of being identified as poor in comparison to the financial ability of the non-slum dwelling population. Employment, Access to adequate Health Care, Ability to continue in Education, Living conditions and Addiction. Each area contributes to the other areas which in turn cause a cycle of being poor which is difficult to escape. Using Phothong, the community which I currently reside in, is as a place for both individual interviews and comparison to national standards and help flush out these principles.

Employment

“When I applied for the job I lied and said I wasn’t married. Single women are more likely to get accepted because they are more likely to remain childless and thus take less sick days.”

-P. Gop

Most poor people in Thailand find themselves at a disadvantage in the application process while seeking employment. Due to definite racial, social-economic, and gender biases which are encouraged through a buddhist worldview of Karma. “If you are poor, you probably did something in a past life to deserve to be poor” Which can translate to mean your character is possibly questionable. This bias coupled with lack of education feeds into the reality that due to lack of stable employment most slum dwellers create jobs in the informal economy verses attach themselves in the formal economy. They become their own bosses to survive.

The informal economy can be a place of great creativity and freedom, but it can also be a system of instability and limited resources. For those who recycle, sell second hand items, are street/home food vendors, or other handy jobs they are at greater risk of a roller coaster economic life baste on Weather conditions, personal relationships, and supply of items.

“ For 8 months I sold food on the side of the street, I made enough to take care of my family and buy the next days worth of food to sell, but then raining season came and I couldn’t sell for 3 months. I couldn’t pay for rent on an indoor place so I took a loan with a high interest rate. Now I’m in so much debt I don’t know what to do ”

--Yaay Som Sii

The formal economy with it’s structure, set hours, and indoor facility may have helped Yaay Som Sii not take a dangerous loan. The other option is a small micro finance loan with low interest, proper savings training/ enforcement, and a thought out business plan could help her stand on her feet again. Is Yaay Som Sii under the poverty line? Usually she can bring in adequate money to supply for her family, but with the introduction of Loan Sharks and raining season she operates in practicality under financial hardship most of the time.

Unfortunately this is not an uncommon story in slum communities. Often access to stable employment leaves slum dwellers vulnerable and enslaved to a cycle of having a little money only to have no money very quickly. This is not to say that the informal economy is all bad. In many cases, like the smoothie lady who makes drinks out of her house with just a blender and some fruit, the informal economy can be an example of great creativity and freedom, but does require self- discipline and safe saving options.

Health Care:

Thailand is know for medical tourism in which thousands of people from other countries travel to Thailand to receive affordable and excellent medical treatment. In an attempt to help the

poor, Mr. Thaksin, former prime minister, introduced universal health care for those who financially could not afford the great standards the country offered by introducing the 30 baht (1\$)/month health plan. Although this is a great improvement to no-health care there are limitations. The 30 baht card only covers what the doctor deems as absolutely necessary and due to the reduced cost also often results in inadequate care.

“I went to the doctor because my side really hurt, he told me he’s not sure what it was. It might be appendicitis, but I wasn’t in enough pain to justify a CAT scan, so I was told if it gets worse the I could come back. Hopefully if it is that it won’t be too late” --P. Yut

*“ The doctor says I’ll always limp from this broken leg.” P. Saney
Meanwhile a physical therapist saw it in passing and exclaimed if He didn’t have to wait so long at the government hospital he would have had no problems. The limp isn’t a result of the break, it’s a result of inadequate health care.*

Some health care is better than no health care, but even with the 30 Baht card, one of the indicators of those who are poor is “are they able to afford Good health care, or acquire employment which provides access to the high standards offered to tourist?” Often a sign of being poor is when a simple medical procedure (like appendicitis) could completely devastate the financial stability of a family. Too often things not covered in the 30 baht card have depleted any savings or financial cushion they may have had. The other thing that happens like P. Saney is because of an injury and inadequate or slow health care they are prevented from working at the same level of ability and money as before the accident. This also perpetuates the poor remaining poor.

Access to Higher Education:

Thailand allows access to all citizens to higher education, but beginning in Junior High (*Moh I*), tuition fees and school requirements begin weeding out the middle class from the poor. The poor, unable to afford school must either drop out or find work in conjunction with school.

*“I’m the oldest boy in my class because I work one year, go to school one year.
It’s hard but I realize now that working is hard too. Hopefully if I can finish high-school
I can get a better easier job. “ ----Biek (before invited into the scholarship program)*

*“Today, I Graduate. i couldn’t have done it with out the Thai Peace Foundation. I think student scholarship is the most important thing we can do for the poor. Education opens so many doors”
- Sprite (current intern)*

Higher education opens the doors for better employment opportunities and ultimately is the ladder to escape a cycle of being poor. As an estimated percentage I would guess 70% of kids residing in slum communities drop out of school by the age of 16. The amount who finish high-school is surprising low. Without proper access to education they may be able to survive above poverty level but well within the poor level.

“I’m the only one of my friends left who is still in school and doesn’t have a baby. It’s sad I choose to stay in school and I lost all my friends” ---Joy (age 17)

Living Conditions:

“They say we have proper sewage system, but I don’t believe it based on the sounds I hear coming from my own bathroom and the bathroom of my neighbors. “ -Christy Johnson

It is the goal of the National Housing Index of Thailand to eradicate all slums. Thus alone acknowledging that slum living conditions are less than ideal by national standards. While most of Bangkok is built out of concrete and is continually being built up thru high-rises. Most slum communities are dangerously located near or over canals making them vulnerable to floods and waterborne/mosquito borne diseases. Slum houses also are usually no more than 2 stories of wood and corrugated metal sheets.

Slum houses are vulnerable to the elements. When it’s hot season they are like ovens absorbing heat from the metal sheets roofs and when it’s rainy season are often leaky and likely to have unwanted critters like rats or snakes. Walls are thin and closely connected to other families walls making privacy difficult. This fits the description of Phothong and most other slum communities. The poor are most identified by how much time they spend outside of their house. Those who can afford more comfortable housing tend to stay i them more. The poor often find their homes to hot to be in and thus create an outdoor shaded gathering area within the slum.

Addictions:

Addictions can happen in any economic setting, but statistically they appear in greater percentage amongst the poor. For some it’s gambling in attempts to try to not take out loans from loan Sharks which unfortunately often leads to greater economic hardship. For some it’s alcohol as a stress reliever, For some it’s drugs to feel a sense of Euphoria and or to numb the pain.

“ Yes, I drink. It’s the one thing I do for myself. I can’t afford much, but I can afford beer and then I don’t have to think about what else I can’t buy” --M

Are Addictions a result of being poor? or Do additions cause someone to be poor.? Both can and usually are true. Being below the national standard of living often drives people to additions but additions also don’t help the economic stability of a family member. Sometimes the cycle may even result in Selling body or drugs as a way to make money. These are often profitable means to acquire quick money fast, but can also quickly end in greater physical and emotional poverty.

Assesment questions to determine poor Status in Bangkok Thailand?

- 1) Do you have access to adequate employment?
- 2) Are you able to make enough and save enough for your families daily expenses?
- 3) Do you have access to good health care?
- 4) Do you have money in savings incase of an emergency?
- 5) Are you able to proceed to higher education (yourself or your children)
- 6) Do you have access to Sanitary water?
- 7) Does your sewage drain properly?
- 8) Is your house built to protect from the elements?
- 9) Is the stress of money driving you to unhealthy behaviors?
- 10)How far to you plan in advance? day, week, month, year?

Bibliography

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[Thanks also to the Phothong Neighbors who contributed their thoughts.](#)