

## 'DEVELOPMENT KING'

BY HÅKAN BJÖRKMAN

THE LAST STOP OF SECRETARY-GENERAL Kofi Annan's May 2006 trip through Asia was a quiet ceremony in a beautiful royal palace—an event of great simplicity, yet a source of immeasurable pride and joy for the people of Thailand. He presented King Bhumibol Adulyadej with the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of the King's contributions to human development, poverty reduction and conserving the environment in Thailand. This is the first time such an award has been given.

The ceremony took place on the eve of huge celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the King's accession to the throne. In honouring the world's longest reigning monarch, Mr. Annan stated: "If human development is about putting people first, there can be no better advocate for it than His Majesty." These words touched the hearts of all Thai people. This special award is presented to individuals who have demonstrated outstanding commitment in their lifetime to furthering the understanding and progress of human development in a national, regional or global context. It is an important part of UN efforts to promote human development as the *modus operandi* for today's global development efforts.

Human development, reduced to its essence, is a very simple concept: it puts people and their well-being at the centre of development and provides an alternative to the traditional, more narrowly focused economic growth development paradigm. It is about people, empowering them and expanding their opportunities to live long, healthy, knowledgeable and creative lives. Human development makes no compromises and embraces equitable economic growth, sustainability, human rights, security and political freedom.

During his 60-year reign, King Bhumibol has promoted rural development and helped improve the lives of the poor through over 3,000 development projects across Thailand. For him, the people come first and he has continuously travelled across the country visiting communities, even in the most remote areas, making him the most widely travelled king in Thai history. With an emphasis on small-scale agriculture, appropriate farming technologies, sustainable use of water resources, environmental conservation and flood and drought mitigation, the King's projects have brought benefits to millions of people in rural areas across the country, regardless of their citizen's status, ethnicity or religion.

The King's achievements include integrated rural development projects in northern Thailand, which have helped to significantly reduce the production of opium harvests through crop substitution. This has benefited ethnic groups living in the mountainous areas along the borders with Myanmar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic and improved their access to health care and education. The King has also given his Royal patronage and active support to a wide range of important social causes: promoting the health and well-being of children; supporting polio eradication campaigns; combating iodine deficiency and leprosy; improving access to formal and informal education; and providing scholarships to orphans. And the list goes on.



PHOTO/BUREAU OF THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD, THAILAND

Secretary-General Kofi Annan (right) presents the Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand at a ceremony held at the royal residence in May 2006.

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*"As the world's 'Development King',  
Your Majesty has reached out to  
the poorest and the most vulnerable  
people of Thailand—regardless of  
their status, ethnicity or religion—  
listened to their problems and  
empowered them to take their  
lives in their own hands."*

Secretary-General Kofi Annan

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The UNDP award is also in recognition of the King's visionary development-thinking. During times of rapid globalization, his "sufficiency economy" philosophy—emphasizing moderation, responsible consumption and resilience to external shocks—is of great relevance to communities worldwide. Inspired by Buddhism, the philosophy's "middle-path" approach reinforces the United Nations own advocacy of a people-centred and sustainable path towards human development. Gaining momentum in Thailand after the 1997 financial crisis, this philosophy advocates economic stability over unbridled growth. It also highlights the need to strengthen the moral fibre of society so that everyone, especially public officials and business people, respects the rule of law, upholds democratic principles and adheres to moral values.

At the community level, the King's philosophy stresses the importance of "self-immunity"—in other words, the need for people to become resilient against external or internal shocks, be they economic downturns, soaring fuel prices, natural disasters, ill health in the family or bad harvests. Sufficiency economy puts great importance in the diversification of farming and household production to guarantee that basic subsistence needs are met in times of hardship. A kind of "risk-management strategy", it helps reduce the risk of depending on a single crop or a single source of income.

This concept of self-immunity and resilience to such shocks has great relevance for people worldwide: plantation workers in West Africa made destitute by sugar subsidies in rich country; farmers in Guatemala devastated by fluctuating coffee prices; or poor people in Bangladesh, whose livelihoods are washed away by floods with relentless regularity.

Diversification does not only come in the form of mixed farming but also supplementary income generation by which farmers, especially women, are encouraged to organize themselves and produce handicrafts and other products using readily available materials in the community. This has done wonders for the empowerment of poor women in rural areas in Thailand. Once a household is strong enough, the King encourages communities to organize themselves into cooperatives, create revolving funds and find other ways of helping each other. Having achieved self-immunity, rural communities can participate in the wider economy and safely reap its benefits.

The world has much to learn from the King of Thailand's lifetime achievements in promoting human development and his visionary development-thinking. It is hoped that this award will help draw the world's attention to this unique source of experience and wisdom. □

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