PRAYONG RONNARONG

All his life, Thai farmer Prayong Ronnarong has lived by the rhythm of the rubber tree. It takes seven years for new trees to start producing latex. So, as a young man, while nurturing his saplings, he grew cash crops and took on odd jobs such as sea mining. And when disaster struck, as it did in 1962 when a typhoon devastated rubber plantations in southern Thailand, he started the seven-year cycle all over again.

But if things went well and the trees matured, Prayong would wake up in the very early hours to tap each tree, finishing at daylight and then processing the sap into rubber sheets. When he had enough sheets, he took them to rubber traders, who would grade the rubber. "It's not we who would tell them 'this is worth this much,'" says the farmer. "They would set the price and weigh the rubber sheets. We said, 'This is one hundred kilos.' They said, 'No, it's only ninety-eight kilos.' And we had no choice but to accept."

Prayong still lives by the rubber tree, but these days, he and other farmers in the subdistrict of Mairiang (population: 7,691) have more control over their lives. They have formed a cooperative to improve the quality of their rubber, run their own community rubber-processing factory, and sell their rubber at a price they set themselves. Learning from Mairiang, ten other communities have formed their own rubber-processing facilities and now work with Mairiang on joint marketing, sales, and other projects.

Prayong's cooperative has also set up the Mairiang Community Learning and Development Center whose activities cover all aspects of rural life, including interactions between the elderly and the young, Thai traditional healing, and livelihood programs such as food processing. "The experience we had with rubber convinced us to use the same approach to plan our life in a holistic way," says Prayong, who is the center's chairman. "We should plan everything [ourselves] and do it together. We should really [determine] our own needs and potential and come up with solutions from the inside, not wait for . . . assistance from the outside."

Born in 1937, the community leader grew up in Nakhon Sithammarat Province in southern Thailand, in the subdistrict of Nakacha, about six kilometers from Mairiang. His parents, Wang Ronnarong and Chang Ronnarong, owned three hectares of land that they planted with rubber and, for family consumption, rice, vegetables, and fruit trees. As the eldest of six children, Prayong helped care for his younger siblings. In the mornings, the boy brought the cows to pasture and fed himself and his brothers and sisters. After school, he brought the cows home, fetched water, cleaned the rice, and prepared the ingredients for the evening meal that his mother would cook when she and his father returned from the fields.

While difficult, it was a sustainable way of life. Farmers in Nakacha grew their own food and earned cash from rubber, even though the native trees they tapped yielded low-grade latex in small quantities. Prayong and his family lived in a spacious house, a traditional dwelling of wood and cement roof tiles produced in the village. His maternal grandparents had a home nearby. "The people lived by relying on one another, supporting one another in a small community," Prayong recounts.

He was no rebel, but the young Prayong needed to understand why things were done the way they were. His questions sometimes upset his parents. At such times, the boy found an ally in his grandfather, who would explain that Prayong did not mean any disrespect. “I was very close to my grandfather,” says Prayong, who describes him as a man respected by everyone in the village. He was a healer and also the person “who performed local [religious] ceremonies, who recorded knowledge of traditional medicine on paper, and who was in contact with government officials and outsiders.”

Whenever a patient came, Prayong would collect the herbs his grandfather needed. The older man also taught him his letters. “I could read before I went to school,” says Prayong. Because of this, the boy was enrolled in two classes in his first year at Nakacha’s small village school. “I was always first in my class,” he recalls proudly. “When I was in the first grade, my teacher asked me to teach arithmetic because we didn’t have enough teachers.” But he was no teacher’s pet. Prayong was once whipped with a switch for letting a classmate copy his arithmetic homework.

It was wartime and the children learned to scramble whenever Japanese airplanes buzzed overhead. Prayong never encountered Japanese soldiers, but he did witness an aerial dogfight once while he was out in the pasture with the cows. Afterwards, he and the other children collected bullet shells that fell to the ground. The war ended soon after, in 1945, and life returned to normal for both children and their parents.

Prayong completed primary school at eleven, and then enrolled at the nearest secondary school eight kilometers away. Every day, he and four other boys walked to town and then back again. “I was the smallest and they sometimes left me behind,” says Prayong. After six months, his parents decided the hike was too much for him and sent him to live with an aunt in town. But Prayong later contracted malaria and could not sit for his exams. It was decided that the best thing for the recuperating boy was to quit school and help out on the farm.

Prayong’s entrepreneurial bent emerged in his mid-teens. When his siblings were old enough to help with the farm chores, he was free to earn money on his own. His father bought him a portable cement tile maker, a piece of equipment that allowed Prayong to offer his services to local homebuilders. Instead of ordering roof tiles that could easily break when transported over long distances, they preferred instead to ask a tile maker like Prayong to make the tiles on the spot. Prayong earned from twenty to thirty baht a day doing this—good money at that time.

When he had saved enough, Prayong hired two assistants and built a small factory near a river two kilometers from his parents’ house, on land owned by a family friend. Prayong would buy cement and coloring materials from town, mix them with sand from the river, and produce roof tiles that would then be transported on the river back to town. The small enterprise flourished until mass-produced tiles from commercial factories came to southern Thailand. Prayong had to close his business and take a job in a logging camp, cutting trees and transporting them up and down the river.

About a year later, Prayong left this work to become a monk. At that time, all Thai males were expected to serve in a Buddhist temple when they turned twenty, studying the scriptures and preaching to the people. Monkhood and military service marked the transition to adulthood and fitness for marriage. “I was very happy to spend two years there [at the village temple] with friends and colleagues,” recalls Prayong. “There were altogether thirty-four of us. I remember it was a time for me to think about my future. I told my friends I would not be a monk for more than two or three years, and then I would get married at twenty-five. I would work hard for about thirty years, and then retire and work for the good of society.”

After completing his temple obligations, Prayong reported to the military office. But his number was not called, so he became a reservist. The young man helped on his parents' farm until he got married at twenty-four in 1961. It was an arranged union. "Both our parents agreed to the wedding and then told us about it," says Prayong. "Then we started to get to know each other and got married after less than a year." His wife, Nap Ronnarong, was from Mairiang, and Prayong moved there after the wedding.

In Mairiang, Prayong's father-in-law let the couple tap mature rubber trees on an existing plantation, while they planted saplings on their own two hectares of land. It would take at least seven years for the new trees to mature and yield latex. Prayong had already completed the planting when a devastating typhoon struck in 1962. Some eight hundred people died, most of them on the coastal areas, and the rubber trees in Mairiang and surrounding areas were destroyed. "Nobody was left with anything," says Prayong.

Fortunately, the Thai government had set up a fund in 1960 from a levy imposed on rubber sales. The planters had been reluctant to draw money from it, worried that the government would somehow end up confiscating their land. As a result, there was a significant amount of money available to rehabilitate the destroyed plantations. Prayong took advantage of it. He used his share to replant with new, high-yielding rubber trees.

While waiting for the trees to mature, Prayong looked for ways to feed his family. His wife gave birth to their first son in 1962; four more children followed. Prayong joined a crew diving for copper-rich sand in the sea surrounding Pangna Province, about two hundred kilometers from Mairiang. The men would take a boat two kilometers from the shore, plunge eighteen meters into the water, and scoop the sand into buckets. Soon, Prayong's entrepreneurial spirit kicked in and he opened his own mining business with some friends. With fourteen employees working two shifts, the enterprise earned enough for Prayong to acquire more land for his rubber plantation and to hire workers to care for the trees.

All this time, Prayong was commuting by bus between Mairiang and Pangna. When the first of his rubber trees were reaching maturity, Prayong left the sea-mining venture to return permanently to Mairiang and his growing family. The new rubber variety turned out to be three times as productive as traditional trees. Prayong plunged back into the rhythms of plantation life, tapping the trees, processing the sap, drying the latex, and, in between, weeding and taking care of a small orchard whose fruits brought in a bit of extra money.

Prayong would wake up at 2:00 a.m. to score the trees, since the sap flows most freely before dawn and he had nearly six hectares to cover. Mixed with water and formic acid, the sap turns into coagulated latex after around three hours. The resulting rubber sheets are dried under the sun for up to two days, and then brought to town to sell to traders. It was a long working day, but Prayong's family life did not suffer. "My wife and I looked after the plantation, and since it's our own, we could organize [our own time]," he says. "It's not like being an employee and having to work full-time somewhere else. It was not difficult for us to be close to our children."

When the couple's new trees started yielding latex in 1968, rubber prices were stagnant at eight baht per kilo, more or less the same as before the typhoon six years earlier. "At that time, it was still not too bad because the standard of living was not that high, and so you could still make it," says Prayong. By the late 1970s, however, rubber prices continued to remain low while the cost of other goods rose, squeezing the farmers' finances.

One way to get better prices was to raise the quality of the rubber. The planters of Mairiang spent countless hours discussing new methods of nurturing and tapping rubber trees and of

processing and drying latex. Prayong seized every opportunity he could to cull good ideas from other farmers, he says, and went “anywhere I could” to do so.

But one drawback soon became apparent. An individual might raise the quality of his latex, but it did not count for much since the traders bought in bulk, combining the rubber sheets brought by many farmers and grading the latex according to the lowest quality. More often than not, this meant a “four” in the four-grade scale used in the trade.

One obvious solution was to combine all the sap and process the latex together, thus coming up with rubber sheets of uniform high quality. By banding together, the farmers could also set the price themselves, instead of letting the traders pay what they wanted. But this was not an easy proposal to sell to planters who had been doing things independently for decades. Most of them were indifferent or disagreed with the idea, so Prayong thought the best course was to first form a core group of like-minded people. “Let’s show the rest what we mean,” he suggested. “Then the people will see [how the idea works] and will gradually join.”

The group of twelve, which included one of Prayong’s brothers and two other relatives, went about their task methodically. “There were three elements,” says Prayong. “One, our products depended on the weather and the climate. Two, we needed to know the real needs of the market. Three, the price was always set by somebody else and not the producers.” There was little to be done with weather, so Prayong and his friends focused on the other two issues.

First, they needed information. They examined the sap their trees produced and found that they were all of good quality. But after processing, the quality of the resulting rubber sheets was found to be inconsistent. Some were good, others were middling. “We asked some concerned organizations about the techniques to control the quality of the product,” says Prayong. “We went on study trips to [rubber-processing] factories, both state enterprises and in the private sector.” It took two years to complete the study, as the twelve members had to work long hours on their own plantations; moreover, the factory managers they wanted to talk to, perhaps worried about competition, were less than forthcoming.

Still, the group members diligently wrote down what they observed and put together all the technical and business information they gathered. One thing stood out. They would need ten million baht to set up their own rubber-processing factory. Even a scaled-down community facility would require nearly a million baht. Registered as a small-scale farmers’ cooperative, the group began raising capital for the venture. After raising half a million baht from thirty-seven families, Prayong and his partners launched a small para rubber-processing facility in 1984.

It was good timing. Demand for condoms and rubber gloves were soaring over worries about acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and other health matters. Rubber prices rose. “We could sell up to thirty-four baht a kilo, which is a very high price,” recalls Prayong. Because the factory could turn out rubber sheets of high and uniform quality, Prayong and the other farmers could demand a premium of four baht above the average price. Soon enough, they were able to raise the rest of the capital they needed to complete the factory and keep it going.

Prayong hired workers to take care of his own plantation, while he managed the new factory from 1986 until 1991, when he became chairman of the cooperative. He ran the operation with an accountant, a bookkeeper, and sixteen workers, all of them shareholders or their relatives. The factory gave priority to the latex of the thirty-seven members of the cooperative, as well as to those applying to become members. Eventually, the membership totaled 176 families, and the original factory was expanded and modernized with some aid from the provincial government.

The initiatives at Mairiang did not go unnoticed. A few years after Prayong’s cooperative launched its community factory, the project caught the attention of the nongovernmental

organization Village Foundation. “We came in because we would like all communities to come up with something like that,” says Seri Phongphit, a foundation leader who sometimes acts as an English translator for Prayong. At that time, NGOs were rethinking the way they were helping Thailand’s communities. “We had a project-oriented development approach,” explains Seri. “We realized that most of our projects failed because we were doing exactly what the government was doing. The only difference was that we had less money.”

“We didn’t understand the communities,” Seri goes on. “We didn’t understand their way of life, we didn’t understand their values, we didn’t understand their wisdom. We thought we knew better than them.” The Village Foundation decided to learn from individuals and groups that were succeeding in community development. Prayong was one of those people. In the mid-1990s, the foundation helped other communities in Nakhon Sithammarat Province study the Mairiang experience and brought community leaders to other places in Thailand to learn about resources, capital, savings, labor, and potential products. These communities eventually established ten rubber-processing factories with subsidies from the provincial government.

At about the same time, the Thai national government approved a plan to create one thousand community factories across the nation. The first phase involved funding three hundred rubber factories at a cost of 3.8 million baht each, but most failed. “Unfortunately, in the top-down process, most communities were uninformed about the community factory until government officials announced that a rubber processing factory would be built in their villages,” the United Nations Development Program wrote in a report. “Other than a few workshops and some training, there was no community learning process similar to the Mairiang group’s.”

In contrast, Mairiang and the ten other factories it helped to establish flourished, even as rubber prices stayed buoyant. Together, they comprised a provincial network of more than 2,700 members who cooperated on technical and business matters such as quality control, marketing, sales, and distribution. But in 1997, as Thailand reeled from a currency meltdown that led to the Asian financial crisis, the network made a self-assessment of what it had achieved and what still needed to be done. The conclusion was that rubber farmers were still at a disadvantage because traders, middlemen, and other outsiders continued to control the manufacture of rubber products.

This led Prayong and other network leaders to form a core study group to review the one-hundred-year history of rubber in Thailand. They interviewed elderly people in rubber communities and collected information from academic institutions and government agencies, among them the Para Rubber Research Institute and various units of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. They met resistance from academics and government functionaries who were not used to farmers asking for data, so the Nakhon Sithammarat group had to assert its right to information under Thailand’s new constitution of 1997.

Meanwhile, Prayong’s group invited other rubber-producing groups to join the Nakhon Sithammarat Provincial Para Rubber Network. When the study group submitted its findings, the network drafted a Thai Para Rubber Strategic Plan that emphasized the use of local resources, reliance on local solutions, and a role for farmers in the manufacture of finished rubber products. The group organized a public hearing that they projected would be attended by ten thousand people.

But only one thousand showed up after politicians tried to persuade many farmers to stay away. “They were afraid this would become a big road map and would influence national policy,” says Prayong. “This is a classic example of how politicians, traders, and government officials have been exploiting the rubber issue for one hundred years.” The government of the day approved a national strategic plan for rubber that did partly incorporate some of the

provincial network's ideas, but it was still firmly on the side of the status quo. Still, Prayong remained hopeful that Thailand's one million rubber-growing households, members of twenty-two rubber associations in as many provinces, would eventually gain a bigger say in their industry.

In Mairiang, the disappointing outcome made people realize how precarious a way of life rubber planting can be. "We realized that we are affected not only by the weather, but also by the world market, by what we today call globalization," Prayong recalls. "Rubber is something we cannot eat. We cannot live by rubber alone, so we needed to find other ways to secure our community life." There was concern that with rubber prices so high and with the new variety of rubber trees requiring so much attention, people were forgetting about raising food and self-sufficiency. What would happen if a typhoon were to strike again or if the middlemen and end users conspired to bring prices down?

When the factory relocated to a new site in 1994, the members began to meet and talk regularly in a space adjacent to the factory protected by a simple roof. Under Prayong's leadership, these informal discussions—and the space—gradually morphed into the Mairiang Community Learning and Development Center, where local people could be taught what they wanted to know, and what they needed to know.

As they had done with the factory, the center's nine-member board first made a study of the situation. "We analyzed our real needs," recalls Prayong. "We need to eat, we need to use things for daily life. We sell rubber and we use the money we earn to buy everything. We rely on rubber for everything. So we tried to come up with [ways to] . . . reduce our dependency on rubber."

Utilizing the traditional knowledge of community elders, the center began offering informal classes in animal husbandry, fish raising, food processing, and other livelihood activities. Mobilizing Mairiang's elderly to pass on their knowledge to the young had the added bonus of bringing the generations closer together and keeping alive unwritten folk wisdom such as the practice of herbal medicine. The center also built on synergies with the plantations, such as how to make use of rubber by-products to produce soda and turn out wood products from aging rubber trees.

Mairiang's center participants were encouraged to organize themselves into groups according to the activities they were interested in. By 2004, there are eleven such groups, including one focused on producing family consumer items such as soap, shampoo, and laundry detergents; another on pig rearing; and still another on herbal medicine and organic fertilizers. In time, as group activities generated income, village-level savings schemes were organized along with social welfare funds to help with health, education, and other needs of Mairiang, all of whose adult population belong to one livelihood group or another.

As the learning center's activities multiplied, it became necessary to involve more people in strategic planning, coordination, and management. "We decided to invite representatives from each of the eight villages in Mairiang," Prayong recounts. Each village nominated five representatives to a forty-strong council that would meet the second day of every month. The council heard reports on the progress of livelihood projects and decided on new initiatives to help solve problems.

Eventually, as community projects became self-sustaining, the village representatives added banking to their concerns. In discussions following the regular council meetings, individuals with money-generating ideas began pitching their ideas to others with extra capital. These informal exchanges led to the establishment of a community bank. Nowadays, on the day the council

meets, many more members show up to do their banking. They also end up discussing other issues of the day, such as elections.

While Prayong is studiously nonpartisan, he believes that the learning center should educate Mairiang's farmers on larger issues. "We also talk about politics, law, and everything concerning the life of the community," he says. In recent years, the center linked up with provincial educational institutions to develop and offer college-level seminars. "Mairiang has become a model on how to integrate formal, non-formal, and informal education at all levels, from the family to the university level," says Prayong proudly. "Local people get access to education without having to go to urban centers." Some of the learning center's participants have gone on to become government officials at the subdistrict and district levels.

Looking back, Prayong says the national government's strategic plan, which involves cooperation with two other rubber-producing countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, has at least kept rubber prices stable at fifty baht or higher. "Producing, this is the people's and the community's own thing, [including] comprehensive management and marketing," he says. "There has been no intervention from the state as they used to do." These days, the government focuses on international issues, such as supporting rubber prices in world markets.

The failure of a farmer-centered national strategic rubber plan notwithstanding, Mairiang's initiatives may yet influence the way Thailand is governed. "Mairiang has become a model for learning centers and strategic planning at the subdistrict level, [and is seen as such] by different ministries, government organizations, especially by the National Economic and Social Development Board," says Prayong. "They're preparing for the tenth five-year plan, which is not going to be done by [a central] board anymore. It has to come up from communities, using the approach of Mairiang and the approach the Village Foundation has [distilled from] different experiences as the framework."

Now in his sixties, Prayong continues to learn from others. As a board member of the Village Foundation and the Community Enterprise Institute, he has traveled to Europe and Japan to talk about the Mairiang experience. "In Europe, I learned that farmers need knowledge in high technology, which is different from Asia, and I think it is because their resources are much more limited than in our country," he says. "In Japan, farmers also have very poor resources, so they work harder [to accumulate] a lot of knowledge in order to add value to the very limited resources they have. We have good soil, we're richer in natural resources, but what is lacking in us is knowledge of how to manage these resources. If we in Thailand, if we farmers learn more and know better how to manage our resources, we can still go quite further."

But he is lukewarm toward the practice in the developed world of government subsidies for the agricultural sector. It makes things difficult for farmers in places such as Thailand, he concedes, but he reckons that state finances would not allow it. However, instead of advocating a global ban on subsidies to farmers by rich governments in order to level the playing field, Prayong takes the practical road. "It is very difficult for farmers to compete in this globalized society," he says, "but we can have a good chance given the strength we have, given the rich resources we have, and if the government provides us with legal and technical support."

And also if farmers continue to till the land in a sustainable way. Prayong is aware that young people in many parts of Asia and the world are leaving the countryside for the cities. That is not yet a problem in Mairiang, since young people there can still earn a living in the subdistrict; only the few who have attended university have left the farm for government service or the business sector. In fact, "we still lack labor in Mairiang," says Prayong. "We still need people from outside."

He sees the same dynamic at work in his own family. The eldest and the youngest children have become government officials, while two others have set up their own agriculture-related businesses. It is the middle son who has decided to become a farmer. "This is the one who inherits what I have in farming," says Prayong. "Someone has to inherit and the rest will have to go find their own way. Otherwise, if all of us would share, we'd just have a small piece of land. I think it's not bad if we have someone who continues farming, as the rest do other things."

Prayong himself will be staying on in the farm and in the community to share what he has learned in the past decades. As he told his fellow monks at the Nakacha village temple so many years ago, he planned to work hard for thirty years and then work for the good of society after that. Like a venerable rubber tree, Prayong will continue to share the rich sap of his experience and wisdom with the people of Mairiang and the wider world beyond it.

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