

A little learning goes a long way...

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How do you reach the furthest behind, meaningfully? What do you give them that will allow them to change their own trajectory in life, to impact their immediate surroundings, and to advance their societies, their countries? You give them access to quality education.

Time and again, this has been the single, most effective game-changer in the lives of so many people who were born without other means to get ahead in life. Education continues to be, in fact, a social ladder when it comes to overcoming systems of privilege and inequality. For those who struggle on the margins of our societies, it opens doors.

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has opened that door for so many underprivileged children in Thailand, engaging with the agencies responsible to improve the entire system of education in the country. Her sole desire has been to make quality education accessible to all, and in particular, the most disadvantaged. In Thailand, this has meant access to quality education for children living in the remote and rural areas of the country. It has also meant reaching those living in the mountainous areas where accessibility is close to impossible, and those living along areas bordering our neighbouring countries.



The Lions Mahachak 9 Border Patrol Police School, Mae Taeng District, Chiangmai province in the north of Thailand, under the Office of the Royal Development Projects Board (ORDPB)

Credit: Office of the Royal Development Projects Board (ORDPB) website

Since her youth, Her Royal Highness has been a firm believer in the power of knowledge. She herself, has been devoted to studying and applying a variety of knowledge gained to improve people's lives in Thailand. Her Royal Highness has focused on advocating "education for all" through advancing collaboration among all stakeholders, both in government and the private sector, with the ultimate goal of creating a network of knowledge-sharing, technical support, and resource mobilization, not only in Thailand, but worldwide.

Embracing her vision, government and academic institutions began to follow her example in the pursuit of academic excellence and a better life for the country's future generations. In 1979, that vision materialized with The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Foundation, which began providing concrete support to needy students in schools, vocational colleges and universities. Then, in 1983, Her Royal Highness expanded these efforts to start a project to provide better access to quality education for children living in the rural outreaches of the country.

It was through activities under this project that teachers, especially border patrol police teachers, were trained on specific teaching methods under specific conditions targeted towards achieving concrete learning outcomes for these children. This project later included a particular focus and training on improving education for stateless and minority children.

Through her work, the more disadvantaged children she impacted, the more Her Royal Highness began to recognize and give equal importance to other factors shaping children's development. This included providing good nutrition and combatting iodine deficiency through lunch projects, providing access to technology for schools in rural areas, and improving the quality of teachers through awards and scholarships.

In 1990, Her Royal Highness initiated the Deficiency Disorder Control Project. In cooperation with UNICEF and salt producing companies in Thailand, the Iodine Deficiency Disorder rate in primary school children in Thailand has continuously been kept at under 5 percent.

In 1995, Her Royal Highness initiated the IT for Rural Schools Program, as part of her comprehensive IT project for education, to address inequality by providing access to computers and IT equipment to member schools. Through this program, teachers and students in rural, remote areas of Thailand were able to experience and develop their skills in the use of technology.



Online learning

Credit: The Information Technology Foundation under the Initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn website

Her Royal Highness' dedication and contributions in the field of education over the years then inspired the Teacher's Council of Thailand, Ministry of Education, to establish the Princess Maha Chakri Award in her honour in 2015. The Award is given once every two years to 11 outstanding teachers from ASEAN Member States and Timor Leste, honouring dedicated teachers, promoting the teaching profession, and strengthening international relations in the field of education.



Credit: Princess Maha Chakri Award website

Her Royal Highness' work has also been recognized by the international community and several international organizations. One is UNICEF, which has

presented her with the Life-Time Achievement Award for her significant role and unwavering commitment in improving the lives of children in Thailand, especially those in remote and disadvantaged areas.

In 1991, Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn was awarded the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service. Established in 1957, the Ramon Magsaysay Award was and is considered Asia's highest honour, the region's equivalent to the Nobel Prize.

It was at the Magsaysay Award ceremony, that Her Royal Highness shared with the audience a glimpse into the inspiration behind her work:

“It is the duty, and also the highest aspiration of a Thai to take part in any work aimed at the development and prosperity of our beloved country, Thailand, and to help our less fortunate neighbour have a better life.”

Indeed, the well-being and quality of people's lives cannot be improved by one person alone. It takes collective and consistent effort, and it takes time. In fact, it takes all of us, to do our part in contributing to societal well-being, for the future of our children and generations to come. In the world we live in today, no one is untouched by the global economic recession, poverty, crime and unemployment, and other societal ills. A quality education is what will best prepare people for an ever-changing environment, and equip them to handle the fast-paced, dynamic and unpredictable circumstances of our world.

I, for one, am also a firm believer in the power of knowledge, and that a little learning goes a long way for everyone, especially for those furthest behind, to whom we owe our best efforts to raise up.

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