

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

THAILAND: TRANSITION FROM CARE THAILAND TO THE RAKS THAI FOUNDATION

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CONTEXT

Over recent decades, Thailand's economic classification has ranged from low- to upper-income status. Today, according to World Bank standards, it is a middle-income country. Irrespective of economic growth patterns, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been a driving force for change during this time. Both movement-related and service-oriented civil society organizations currently play an influential role, acting as intermediaries between communities and government officials. The funding landscape for aid has changed drastically as Thailand's economic status has evolved, with many international donors decreasing funding, or even withdrawing it altogether. For the last two decades, the effects of this economic shift have rippled out to CSOs – many of which now rely on diversified funding streams and locally sourced contributions.

The historical legacy of CSOs in Thailand has been their deep knowledge of local issues and connection with communities. As a result, they are considered to be independent from the government and working for the benefit of society. After four years of military

rule, development-oriented CSOs have found ways to function under the specific constraints of the government. Many smaller INGOs register themselves under a Thai organization name, either a direct translation of their English name or a separate name. It can be difficult to legally operate in Thailand otherwise, and this situation has only intensified under the current government. Today's CSOs are diverse and include political activists. Yet, many are also attempting to look past color politics and, in spite of ongoing political opposition and tension, bring people together to focus on development and projects that will help improve welfare in the country.

STORY OF TRANSITION

While CARE USA was responsible for triggering CARE's exit from Thailand, the transition was driven forward at the local level. In 1990, with Thailand now having reached middle-income status, CARE USA began considering its long-term strategic plan for the Thailand country office, and asking whether CARE was in fact still "relevant." Initially, CARE decided to leave. However, national staff made the case for



All photos by Kiely Barnard-Webster

Conversation between Jennifer Weidman, Kiely Barnard-Webster, one Raks Thai staff member and the Village Head of Mae Chaem on recent organic farming processes in the village

transition, with an influential Thai staff member (the current Executive Director), who had been hired in 1993, driving this effort. The new entity became Raks Thai Foundation (RTF). The transition has resulted in a number of key outcomes.

First, was the creation of a “local” organizational identity, something that was important for RTF post-transition, as this was synonymous with establishing a new role for itself in the civil society sphere. Being “local” was identified by interviewees as “doing work together.” Since the transition, all RTF staff (including the finance and admin teams) have been strongly encouraged by the Executive Director to meet and engage with program participants.

Second, there seems to have been some shift in how institutional impact is conceptualized. Staff are now at the center of strategic decision-making, making regular use of their local networks to best determine community needs and implementation approaches. As a result, RTF has broadened the number and types of partners it engages with.

Third, and arguably most important, has been the organization’s shift to an adaptive way of implementing programs. RTF’s commitment to “experimentation” (as one interviewee called it) before solidifying projects in areas of programming has, at times, led to community-designed programs that are based on historical ways of resolving issues.

KEY LESSONS

Strong community-based leadership is critical. The RTF Country Director, who had professional and lived experience of areas of CARE programming, was hired early in the transition process. He quickly understood a key part of his role was to help advocate and drive forward the transition within CARE. He immediately joined strategic planning conversations, which was key to the success of the transition. The Country Director is Thai, which mattered for setting the tone of the organization. Today, RTF sees itself as a local stakeholder, rather than an external/international organization.

Double standards are not helpful. RTF staff noted that among INGO–NGO partnerships in Thailand, it is common that “... national staff in a country office will only go so far as Field Supervisor – nothing higher. International staff have different expectations from the top for international staff than national staff.” Letting national and local staff take on leadership roles is still not the norm among INGOs and required significant navigation, which in some ways inhibited the transition’s smooth progress early on.

Local brand identity is very important for new entities. This is particularly the case with regard to attracting diverse types of funding, including from the private sector. However, diversifying funding is both challenging and time consuming. Also, as is the case in Thailand, there may be considerable skepticism of local organizations, particularly among government bodies.

Local funding does not necessarily become any easier to access once an entity is localized. As would be the case with an INGO opening a new office, sourcing funding opportunities is very important to RTF. It has searched for relevant networks and organizations to partner with, and explored access to possible funding sources.

Diverse funding streams may be needed at the outset, given a paucity of available local funding. One important lesson learned from the transition was that having a single stable and predictable funder was important, but alone would not have been sufficient. It also poses a further risk to the organization of overdependency on a single funding stream, compromising the flexibility required to adapt or change strategic direction if necessary.

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Cover Photo: Coffee store belonging to a small business owner, and partner of Raks Thai, in Mae Chaem
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