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Interview:

Thai Rice Farmer explains why GM crops are a threat to farmers and won't feed the world

Conducted by Ricarda A. Steinbrecher, Ph.D.,
in Bangkok at a Thai public rice farming fair - 20 Feb 2005
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Summary of points:

- History of rice farming and the introduction of modern technologies.
- Impact of the green revolution and its agro-chemicals on traditional farming, bio-diversity and culture
- What farmers are doing to revert to sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty
- Farmers fear to loose their rights to save and improve their own seed
- Farmers export chemically produced crops but avoid eating it themselves
- Message to Europe and UK – GM crops won't solve the hunger problem. Farmers do not want GM seeds.

Mr Daoreung Pheudphon is from Kut Chum, Yasothorn Province, North East Thailand. He is 40 years old and has been a rice farmer since his childhood. When I asked him whether his family had been rice farmers for a long time he said, "yes, in my family we have been rice farmers since my ancestors, way back".

"They used to farm in the traditional way, planting many varieties of rice. About 30 years ago this changed. In a government program farmers started using chemicals like fertilisers and pesticides. In the first years we still used our own rice seeds, adding chemical fertiliser to the land. In the third year we changed to two modern varieties bred by the Thai government program. These were variety GK6 and 105 How Mali, a jasmine rice breed. We still could save the seeds, as these varieties were not hybrids."

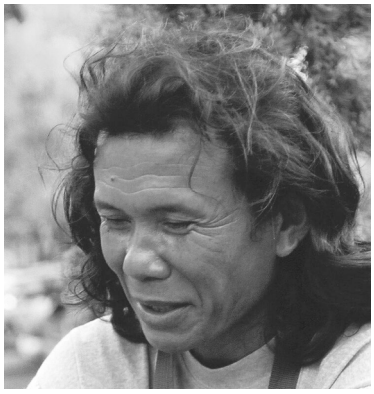
Thus the Green Revolution reached the North East of Thailand. I asked him if this was a good change and whether they felt it had improved their lives. Daoreung Pheudphon said that soon they ran into economic problems and later on into soil problems.

"Every year you use more and more chemical fertiliser, and the prices for fertilisers kept going up and up. Once you start using chemical fertilisers, the soil needs more and more, it can't produce the nutrients for the plants on its own any longer."

"But there were other problems. I remember applying the fertiliser to the field and I would get rashes and skin problems. The fish started getting diseased and became fewer. There were less frogs, and less toads."

Why was this a problem, I wondered?

"Fish and frogs are food, but they also eat pests. Though we don't flood our fields, they will be submerged in the rainy season. Fish will eat, for example, little wormlike pests from the stems of the rice. With less fish and frogs we had less to eat and needed to buy food, adding to our economic problems."



Then he spoke about the soil. Not only had it become addicted to fertilisers, but the land became harder and more compacted. The structure of soil had changed and it was very difficult now to plough the field, especially since they all were using buffalo then. About 5 years after using fertilisers these problems started. "There was now less organic matter in the soil, less earthworms, plants started getting diseased. So 10 years ago other farmers and I started to go back to the old ways, trying to recall the methods and knowledge of our ancestors. We changed some methods and are all in our area growing rice organically."

Was it difficult to convert to non-chemical farming?

"The soil needed a lot of organic matter; we used cow dung, bought chicken dung, ploughed in left over straw and husk. It took a few years, but it is not hard, it all depends on your thinking and your heart to change to organic. And we had to explore again the ancestral knowledge."

Now they plant the fields again between the rice seasons with green cover to protect the soil and generate organic matter. Mostly they use legumes that will give nutrients back to the soil. Some of these legumes are used as food crops, like mung beans, soybeans or kidney beans, others

are used to make green manure or as animal feed. There are charitable organisations and foundations that help farmers to convert away from chemical-dependent, single variety agriculture to non-chemical, multi variety agriculture, and many farmers are following this path.

Most farmers, including himself, still grow Jasmine rice 105, but also other local varieties. Daoreung Pheudphon plants 5 additional local rice varieties, which he sells at the Cooperative mill. This is also where they exchange seeds and varieties, and share their knowledge. The Cooperative then decides whether to sell the rice to the cities, sell it on for export or keep it for local consumption.

When asked whether he feels satisfied with this way of farming, or whether a new technology would be of help, for example genetically engineered varieties, he said:

"Yes, we can live like this. We have fish again and frogs, the land is easy to plough, and we do not just have rice but also grow vegetables, animal feed and make green manure. We do not need genetic engineering. We talked about it in our Cooperative and decided to not touch it, to ban it. GE is definitely not necessary."

If offered, would he use it?

"No. I would not use GE plants. There are too many threats. With the green revolution we already ran into problems. We were down to two varieties of rice and depended heavily on chemical fertilisers and pesticides, our fish and frogs went and although we were farmers, we needed to buy food. With genetic engineering there are many threats. Will the GE varieties mix with our own seeds and local breeds? I am very worried about the loss of diversity, not just of food crops. But I am equally scared of losing the rights to my seeds. And why have herbicide resistant varieties? We do not really have a problem with weeds. In the beginning, when the field is covered with water, the water will control the weeds. Weeds won't grow. And later, we can pull them up, and in any case, many plants growing in the field are not weeds but food. We use them."

But what about pest resistant crops?

"I do not think it will work. GE pest resistant varieties cannot resist pests forever. Pests develop as well and will become resistant in turn, like with chemical pesticides. What shall we do with the future generations of those insects? And what about the good insects? They die. They will also be gone from the ecosystem. If we mess up the ecosystem and the environment, who is going to take responsibility for this? We will all suffer."

And what about drought resistant varieties?

Daoreung Pheudphon shakes his head with a frown: "I do not believe the claims. And why should we need them? We have varieties that grow in dry conditions. We can use these, breed with them, improve them in our own way for our own needs. Seeds need to remain in the farmers hands, not in corporate hands."

When asked about the need for or the usefulness of GE lentils, beans or vegetables he replies:

"We don't need them. And again we would depend on seeds and chemicals. The best method to improve varieties of any crop is to work under the conditions this plant needs to grow. We can develop and improve our own crops and food, I can do it myself, sometimes learning from others. Always exchanging with others."

And then he adds:

"Rice is a way of life, is our culture, our identity. We use rice at many festivals and when making merit, such as giving food to Buddhist monks. It is important for our relations, it is always offered when guests and family come. You offer rice – it is a welcome. Rice is our culture" When Thais say "have you eaten yet – or have you had dinner" they will say "Have you had rice?"

Daoreung Pheudphon's message:

Finally I asked him, if he would like to send a **message to the people, journalists and politicians of the UK and Europe**, given that industry representatives like Clive James are touring Europe claiming to speak on behalf of the hungry and poor, on behalf of the small farmers of the world when saying, that GE will improve farmers lives and solve the hunger problem.

- Daoreung Pheudphon thinks for a while, then he nods and says to me: "Tell them we don't want GMOs. We are confident that the varieties of rice we have can feed both ourselves and others. I think that the hunger argument is just used as a form of advertisement for the benefit of selling the products. It is just an argument for selling, selling seeds and chemicals. I do not think or believe GMOs will change anything with regard to hunger. Hunger is a problem of "commerce" [business]. It is not that the rice isn't there, it just doesn't get to who needs it. With commerce that is too focused on profit, there is the chance that poor people won't have food or rice." In Thai "food" and "rice" are synonyms.

Once we have finished the interview, the farmer Daoreung Pheudphon wants to tell me another thing. "There is a lot of rice farming in central Thailand. This is still done in intensive monocultures with a lot of chemicals. Farmers in this region sell their rice for export or cities, but will buy our rice [from the North East] to eat themselves. They know that their rice is not good for their families and communities."

This reminded me of another story I heard a Thai farmer from Nan say at an event at a sub-meeting of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 10 days ago here in Bangkok. There he said, that many Thai farmers who grow vegetables, do so intensively with chemicals. They will sell these vegetables to the cities, but will plant an extra patch or field without chemicals for their own use.