

2014

Chronicles from the Field: The Townsend Thai Project by Robert M. Townsend

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Recommended Citation

Uneke, Okori (2014) "Chronicles from the Field: The Townsend Thai Project by Robert M. Townsend," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 89: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol89/iss1/20>

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Townsend, Robert M., Sombat Sakunthasathien, and Rob Jordan. *Chronicles from the Field: The Townsend Thai Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013. xi + 135 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

Chronicles from the Field provides a narrative of the origins and operations of the Townsend Thai Project (TTP), the longest running and largest household survey in the developing world. The project started in 1997 and has tracked millions of observations about the financial and entrepreneurial activities of households and institutions, first in rural and, then urban Thailand. The objective of the project was to bridge the gap between academic research and policy design. As the authors, economists Robert M. Townsend and Sombat Sakunthasathien and journalist Rob Jordan, observe: “Many economic and social policies are implemented without the requisite data or appropriate frameworks for analysis. Instead, prior convictions, political considerations, and the advice of outside experts drive policy making. While well intended, such policies can adversely affect those they seek to help” (p. vii). In effect, social and economic policies are often skewed by political considerations. Against this backdrop, TTP offers an alternative basis for policy: collecting extensive data and accurate measurement in the hope of better providing informed economic and social policy. Furthermore, from thoroughly collected data, a framework emerges for understanding poverty and identifying paths to alleviate it.

The book details how the Thai project originated, as well as the challenges and rewards that stem from research designed to understand better the process of economic development within a country. It explores what the project means to the people who jumpstart the growth in development or get trapped in it, whether negatively or positively. As a human-interest story, the narrative touches on the lives of the actors, including the field enumerators and the families and households under study.

The Townsend Thai Project was the brainchild of Robert Townsend, an economics professor at MIT, and Sombat Sakunthasathien, now director of the Thai Family Research Project (TFRP). Townsend was interested in how issues such as risk and insurance affected village economies, while his colleague was concerned with research on banking in rural economies. Prior to the TTP, Sombat had conducted a study on how to create a credit program for the poor hillside peasants. Thus the TTP emerged out of this shared interest. Something about Thailand stood out to Townsend during his first visit there in the 1980s. He noted that the diverse and vibrant economies of the Asian Tigers (Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand) not only warranted examination but also raised many questions, including how the growth of national industry affected local village life. As the authors put it in the introduction to the history of the Townsend Thai Surveys: “The opportunity to collect data, and the desire to better understand how economies were put together from the ground up convinced Townsend that Thailand was a ripe environment in which to begin to understand the elements of economic growth and development” (p. xvii).

Beginning with the original baseline surveys in 1997, the book takes the reader on a journey through Thailand from the mountainous northern regions to its sandy southern shores. The surveys implemented by the TFRP field enumerators carefully examine households, financial institutions, and community leaders. They complete thousands of highly detailed interviews every year. They scrutinize everything from moisture in the soil to hypothetical financial crises, raising such questions as “How do people get by? What helps? What hurts?” (p. xiv). The data consists of several survey instruments and resurveys, which are ongoing. Specifically, annual surveys solicit information from households, financial institutions, the Bank

for Agricultural and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), and village leaders. More intensive monthly resurveys focus on even more detailed data collection on households. Thereafter, the survey data go through rigorous analysis, usually by way of multiple layers of cross-checking and vetting before being considered “clean” data.

The authors note that in-depth knowledge of the local environment is crucial to the operation of the field surveys. To build trust and forge relationships, the enumerators and local staff officials rewarded the households for their time on extensive surveys with gifts to the families at New Year and other local calendar events. The authors describe some of the cultural problems and issues of trust. For example, small business owners, more so in urban areas, mistrusted the survey as a conduit for divulging information to the tax authorities. The problem was not as challenging in rural areas, where the community leader or village head often dispelled any mistrust of the survey from the villagers. Cooperating with local political figures speaks to the importance of respecting cultural differences when conducting field studies.

Chronicles from the Field is a well-written ethnographic report. The narrative takes readers through the problems encountered in sourcing research funding for project, recruiting survey enumerators, and strategizing to dispel fears of mistrust from survey respondents. The importance of Townsend Thai Data is that they continue to yield new and significant findings. The authors hope that what has been found will not only better the lives of those in Thailand over the years to come but also serve as a model and motivation for similar work elsewhere in emerging economies. Indeed, economic models developed in the Thai project have already been applied in Mexico. This book should be a recommended reading for graduate students in development economics, sociology, geography, and political science.

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