

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn: Empowerment to solve the Digital Divide in the Kingdom of Thailand

Thossaphol NORATUS

Information and Communication Technology for All Club
P.O. Box 2, Ratchatewi Bangkok 10401, Kingdom of Thailand Tel. +668-1261-0726
thossaphol@ictforall.org
www.ictforall.org

Abstract

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has been contributing greatly to many facets of Thailand's development. Her Royal Highness takes a full interest in the well-being of the Thai people and has been initiating several development projects and programmes that aim to rise standards of living and quality of life in the Kingdom. Her Royal Highness's Information Technology Project is part of the Princess's Development Programme which emphasizes the use of Information Technology to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged people in Thailand and help them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. This is a way of empowerment to solve the digital divide in the Kingdom of Thailand.

Keywords: Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn; Digital Divide; Kingdom of Thailand



*Her Royal Highness Princess
Maha Chakri Sirindhorn*

1. Introduction

H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has acquired first-hand experiences in working for Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand (His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit) development projects in such fields as health and hygiene, education, water resource development, agriculture and cottage industry by regularly accompanying Their Majesties on visits to remote areas since the age of sixteen (in 1970). From these experiences, she has developed special interests in agricultural extension to improve school children's nutritional conditions; supporting education from pre-school to tertiary levels; and mother and child care. She has also

concentrated on helping the handicapped, especially in using Information Technology (IT) to develop independent living and learning skills (Kanchanapisek 1999). This is her empowerment to solve the digital divide in Thailand.

2. About H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn

H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, born April 2, 1955, is the third child of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit of the Kingdom of Thailand. Her Royal Highness enjoys the widespread admiration of the Thai people. She spends much of her time helping His Majesty the King with his various projects for the happiness of all Thai people.

Her Royal Highness obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in History (First Class Honor, Gold Medal) from Chulalongkorn University in 1976, and a Master of Arts degree in Oriental Epigraphy (Sanskrit and Cambodian) from Silpakorn University in 1978, a Master of Arts degree in Pali and Sanskrit from Chulalongkorn University in 1980 and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in educational development from Srinakharinwirot University in 1986.

Her Royal Highness graciously allowed the Asian Institution of Technology (AIT) to present her with a Ph.D. in Technology. In his capacity as President of AIT Alumni Association (AITAA), Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman invited Her Royal Highness to become an Honorary Member of AITAA.

H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn also allowed Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman to give a short course about the Internet (Charmonman 2007).

So, in the Kingdom of Thailand, H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is often referred to as the "Princess of Technology" or the "Princess of Information

Technology", due to her interest and expertise in applying science for the country's development.



H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn with child

3. Digital Divide Truths

From a report by Digital Divide.org: Ten years of effort to reduce the divide have not been in vain. These lessons have been learned about closing the Digital Divide:

Truth 1: The Divide was widening, but now narrowing, and at an ever-increasing rate.

Truth 2: Closing the Digital Divide may be the only way to make globalization work for the poor.

Truth 3: Closing the Digital Divide is fundamentally about empowerment, that is, it is about using new technologies to empower the poor just as they now empower the rich.

Truth 4: Closing the Digital Divide is one way to sustain the growth of world markets.

Truth 5: World leaders from every sector -- business, government, academia, NGOs -- can benefit from closing the Divide. Yet not one sector has the incentive to lead the effort to close the Divide.

Truth 6: Closing the Digital Divide requires building an "enterprise ecosystem" that offers "end to end solutions" for the poor.

Truth 7: The mid-level countries in relatively advanced emerging markets, not the poorest countries, are the best settings for experimental efforts to close the Digital Divide.

Truth 8: Closing the digital divide involves using new technologies to formalize the "informal economy," thereby bringing the poor into established markets.

Many factors may have contributed towards the Digital Divide, including the structure of opportunities provided by the public policies within each country, such as public and private initiatives towards IT, education and training, investment in science and technology, the costs of ISP services, and the regulation of telecommunications (Norris 2000)

Thailand as a developing country is also involved in the truth of the Digital Divide. But H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is concerned by the problems, as are many in other parts of Thailand.

4. Digital Divide in Thailand

In 2008, in the survey results of the National Statistical Office of Thailand, from 60.35 million Thai citizens who were at least 6 years old used only a computer 16.99 million (28.20%) and 10.96 million (18.20%) used a computer with an internet connection. Most people using computers and the internet were in Bangkok (capital city): 43.80% using only a computer and

36.00% using a computer with internet connection. Secondly, 28.50% and 18.00% respectively of users who lived in the central region (excluding Bangkok). Finally, the North-Eastern region (a rural area) had the least usage of a computer with internet connection, 24.10% and 13.90% respectively. (National Statistical Office of Thailand 2008).

The survey outcome, as mentioned above, showed that Thailand was faced with a serious Digital Divide - the gap between people with effective access to digital and information technology and those with very limited or no access at all.

The National Digital Divide Strategic Framework will increase the social equality in using ICT. The Plan will assist the systematic planning of bridging the Digital Divide, emphasizing web accessibility and assistive technology development to increase ICT access and reduce the barrier of accessing the information by the disabled, the disadvantaged and the senior citizens. The implementation of this strategic plan will enhance the quality of life of the disabled, the disadvantaged, and the senior citizens in Thailand (Punyabukkana and other 2008).

5. H.R.H. ICT Project for solving the Digital Divide in Thailand

H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn said "...In the next stage of development, education plays more roles, and we need more tools, especially ICT to open doors to knowledge and technology."

Her Royal Highness's Information Technology Project is part of the Princess's Development Programme which emphasizes the use of Information Technology to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged people in Thailand.

H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is chairman of the Executive Committee of the Information Technology

Project under the Initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Her Royal Highness's projects always start with tackling basic issues, such as helping children improve their nutrition, preventing disease, and helping them to get a better education. The Princess realizes that once children have a sense of well-being, the next step is to provide them with skills in order to help them take care of themselves and to earn income to improve their quality of life. Only then will their development be sustainable. Information technology can, at this step, play a beneficial role. (Sheldon Shaeffer refers in the Executive Committee of the Information Technology Project Under the Initiatives of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Siridhorn 2003)

Some Information Technology projects under the initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (Executive Committee of the Information Technology Project Under the Initiatives of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Siridhorn 2003) follow:

1) The Princess's IT Project Website -- It can be found at www.princess-it.org The site contains information about the project and its associated programmes and activities, visual archives, manuscripts, and interesting related websites.

2) Information Technology for Education Programme: IT for Rural Schools -- The programme is a component of the Princess's IT Project, started in 1995, with the objective of minimizing educational inequality by providing rural school teachers, students, and disabled children with access to computer technology. Around the country, some 72 rural schools are included in the programme.



H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has been following up the Information Technology for Education Programme in rural schools.

- Basic Computer Maintenance and Repair Programme -- H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn recognized that a substantial increase in IT penetration will lead to a rapid increase in demand for computer maintenance and repair services. Therefore, in 1996, computer maintenance and repair courses started to be offered through a number of vocational schools around the country as an attempt to develop the skills necessary for these schools to provide basic maintenance and repair services for computers and peripherals used in IT for Rural Schools Programme member schools. These schools now provide maintenance and repair courses not only to IT for Rural Schools Programme member schools but also to the general public.

- The IT for Rural School Programme's Members and their Public Services -- In addition to including regular computer courses in their formal curricula, it is not unusual to find that many computer teachers from the schools participating in the IT for Rural School Programme offer extra-curricula computer classes on weekends or during vacations to their students and to fellow teachers. It has spread beyond the member schools to the communities around them. The programme has led to substantial educational, social, and economic

improvements in many communities throughout Thailand. Today, most students from disadvantaged families in remote areas have opportunities to learn how to use computers, write programmes, and surf the Internet.

3) Learn and Have Fun with Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) for Primary School Students -- The CAI for Primary School Students Project was established in 1998 at the initiative of Her Royal Highness. The objective of the project is to select quality educational software from abroad and integrate into the curriculum of primary level.

4) Public Internet in Chiang Mai Public Library (Chiang Mai province, Thailand) -- The key community learning center. Anyone, whether they are inside or outside the formal educational system, can take advantage of this valuable educational resource. The library offers access to a wide range of information on a variety of subject areas and in numerous media, from conventional printed materials to more modern electronic media. The library also provides visitors with free use of Internet terminals to search for information on the world wide web.

5) Educational Development for the Disabled: IT Project at Srisangwan School (Nonthaburi province, Central of Thailand) for Disabled Children -- Since H.R.H. the Princess Mother passed away in 1995, H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn has striven to carry on her grandmother's work for the disabled and has provided continued support to the Foundation and the school. Out of her love and care for children with disabilities, Her Royal Highness urged the Executive Committee of the Princess's IT Project to provide appropriate assistance to Srisangwan School to enable it to enhance its use of IT in addition to the regular IT courses mandated by the Ministry of Education. The Princess's IT Project Executive Committee has worked

with Srisangwan School to establish computer training programmes for both teachers and students. Since 1998, Srisangwan School has taken part in the IT for the Disabled Programme under the Princess's IT Project. The programme has been a great success. The computer skills of the students at Srisangwan School are as good as those of other non-disabled students and the teachers are capable of using computer-assisted instruction programmes to support their own teaching.

6) IT for Disabled Students at Kawila Anukul School -- A school for children with learning difficulties in Chiang Mai province, Northern of Thailand. Her Royal Highness has been a regular visitor at this and other special education schools in Chiang Mai. In 1996, she accepted Kawila Anukul School into the IT for Rural Schools Programme.

7) IT for Mentally Challenged Children at Northern Mentally Retarded Welfare Center, Chiang Mai province of Thailand -- Her Royal Highness kindly accepted the center into the Princess's IT Project and granted one touch-screen computer, a 21-inch monitor, and an adjustable computer desk to the center.

8) Career Development for the Disabled: Information Technology Project -- In 1996, during one of the Executive Committee meetings of the Princess's IT Project, H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn mentioned Pikoonthong Kunthadong. She has had her disability since birth and she was granted support from Her Majesty the Queen at a young age. She asked the Executive Committee to find a computer for Pikoonthong to use in her work and to find used computers for other disabled children in Bann Thong Yu to use. With support from Her Royal Highness, Pikoonthong was granted an Internet connection to allow her to advertise Baan Thong Yu's products on the Internet and receive orders via e-Mail.

9) IT for the Disadvantaged: IT for Sick Children at Chulalongkorn Hospital -- H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is regular visitor to the children's wards at Chulalongkorn Hospital, Bangkok, Thailand. In each ward, there are more than 60 children who have chronic conditions that requires them to stay in the hospital for many months. This long break from regular schooling can present quite an obstacle to their education. So the Computer Center for Sick Children was launched in 1995. Her Royal Highness kindly provided computers and training for teachers on how to develop CAI programmes for children.

10) Unconditional Giving: IT for the Inmates at Bangkok Central Women's Prison -- H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn believes that vocational skill development, coupled with moral education, can be an effective means to rehabilitate prison inmates. Moreover, if the inmates are trained in skills which are in high demand, such as computer skills, after their sentences are finished they will have a better chance of finding a good job and consequently become good citizens. Acting on this belief, Her Royal Highness launched the IT for Inmates Programme under the Princess's IT Project. The programme began at Bangkok Central Women's Prison (Bangkok, Thailand) in 1997. With a 126-hour computer training course, complying with Department of Non-Formal education standards and employing personnel from the Department to conduct the course, it was very well-received by the prison inmates. The programme was extended to the Central Correction Facility for the Drug Addicts and then to Bangkok Special Prison.

11) The DAISY Multimedia Book Project -- Digital Accessible Information System, or DAISY, is an internationally recognized digital standard that allows the production and use of multimedia books on a computer. Though it was originally invented

to assist the blind, DAISY also benefits people with reading difficulties and those who have limited access to printed materials. In addition, the IT for Inmates Programme under the Princess's IT Project provides an opportunity for the inmates to improve their reading and constructively apply their computer knowledge to help others.

6. H.R.H. Recommendations

In a speech on "ICT as a Tool To Harness Knowledge and Technology For Sustainable Development" at High-Level Roundtable, UNCTAD XII, 24th April, 2008, Accra, Ghana. H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn made recommendations to promote ICT as a tool for harnessing knowledge and technology for development. (It can solve the Digital Divide too.)

1) To achieve the optimal benefit from ICT in development, not only the provision of hardware and continuous skill training are necessary, but many issues like infrastructure, management, availability of local contents, etc., are also important in designing a program or project. There is no single solution for all, but we can learn and adapt from the experiences of others.

2) Big information societies are mostly located in urban areas. We should make more effort to expand such information societies to remote areas. This could be achieved through well thought-out and carefully-implemented national ICT policies and e-Strategies that aim at bridging the Digital Divide within the country.

3) Support research and development in ICT and related technologies, including assistive technologies for disabled persons and encourage the conditions that favor technological "spillover effects", for example, more effective technology transfer mechanism. Cooperation among countries in this aspect should be promoted and strengthened.

7. Conclusion

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn is a role model and aspires to decrease the problems of the Digital Divide in the Kingdom of Thailand. Her Royal Highness's Information Technology Project helps those who are disadvantaged, or those who live in rural areas, to access more easily and to benefit from ICT. This helps provide disadvantaged groups with educational opportunities, knowledge and skills development essential for life in today's knowledge societies and globalization.

8. Acknowledgement

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