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JULY 3, 2015

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## Singaporean Moved By The Plight Of The Hmong

**THAILAND** – Three decades following the end of the Indo-China conflict, a bilateral agreement was signed in September 2007 between the government of Thailand and Laotian authorities that would lead to the re-classification of ethnic Hmong refugees as “illegal immigrants” and subsequent deportation of identified Laotian Hmong refugees back to Lao PDR.

This came at a time when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was working to find a humanitarian solution for the plight of the Hmong even though it had never been able to gain access to the refugee camps in the Phetchabun province in Northern Thailand where nearly 8,900 Hmong resided.

These camps were home to generations of Hmong people who were recruited by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Indo-China wars in the 1960s, and who fled to Thailand for political asylum at the end of the wars.

In October 1995, National Review ran an article written by American public policy expert and commentator Michael Johns where the Hmong were described as a people “who have spilled their blood in defense of American geopolitical interests.”

Since the end of the war, the US has resettled more than 250,000 Laotian Hmong refugees. According to GlobalPost, between January 2010 and July 2012, the US granted Laotians asylum in 77 cases involving a total of 268 people. The country has not taken another Laotian Hmong case since then.

Meanwhile, a community of Thai-born Hmong descendants has taken root in Thailand. It is estimated that the population now stands at 150,000. According to RADION International founder and executive director, Eugene Wee, the largest concentration of Hmong-Thai is found in the mountainous

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region in Phetchabun province.

Although the plight of the Laotian Hmong refugees does not necessarily extend to their Thai counterparts, the Hmong-Thai do face a host of other challenges.

In 2013, an article in Bangkok Post reported that “Nearly a million hill peoples and forest dwellers are still treated as outsiders – criminals even, since most live in protected forests. Viewed as national security threats, hundreds of thousands of them are refused citizenship although many are natives to the land”. The Hmong are one of six major hill tribes that reside within Thailand.

**Singaporean Eugene Wee, founder and executive director of RADION International speaks to us about the lessons he has learned in the last eight years living among the Hmong community in Thailand.**



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#### **How did you get started?**

When I was still working in Singapore back in 2007, I found myself with 42 days of accumulated annual leave. That year, I travelled up to Thailand to work with HIV-infected kids and there, I saw 8,900 refugees confined behind barb-wires with hardly enough to get by in Phetchabun. I learned that many of them are Hmong.

Due to the sensitive political situation, the military started clamping down on media coverage of the camp and only a handful of NGOs remained to continue serving the refugees. With little media coverage, NGOs often struggle with getting the necessary visibility and funding for their work, but I feel that the core of humanitarian work should not be about publicity, finances or convenience. It should be about getting aid to the beneficiaries. Sadly, this is just one of many communities that continue to be under-served due to political issues, social stigma or simply because of the challenging terrain.

The more time I spent with the Hmong, the more I got to know them and the immense challenges they are faced with. For the refugees, each day was a struggle to stay alive, for the Hmong-Thais (Hmong people born in Thailand), it was a struggle of an impoverished community plagued by drugs, crime and abuse.

I asked myself if I could help them. After an internal tussle, I proceeded to drain my savings and stock portfolio to help make life more liveable for the Hmong and this is also the founding moment for RADION International.

#### **Who are the Hmong people and what problems do they face?**

The Hmong are an ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. In Khek Noi a village in Phetchabun, there are about 14,000 Hmong people.

Putting aside the complicated historical legacy, there are serious problems within the community that need addressing. In the eyes of many Thais, the Hmong are seen as drug traffickers, but more often than not, the Hmong are simply drug mules lured by the promise of a quick way out of poverty. The Hmong-Thais remain severely neglected and marginalised, with little access to legal support, education and healthcare. An estimated 40% of women are victims of domestic violence and there is no social safety net. In addition, one in four school-going kids under the age of 16 have a history of using drugs.

In my years of working with the Hmong, I have also seen kids being sold into the sex trade or for organ harvesting for less than US\$900. Over the last 8 years, we have been able to engage more than 30% of the community through various programmes.

#### **With multiple problems and limited resources, how did you decide what to focus on?**

We did research on how the rest of the world approached problems. We also invited a lot of people to come down to learn about our work so that we may tap on their ideas. However, to get this right is a fine balance. First world development ideas need to be tailored to fit the local context. Additionally,

too much foreign presence can be detrimental to local community development. So it's often about first understanding local context and getting community buy-in.

In my first year, we invested in a stock of breeding pigs and the intention was that the pig farm would provide a source of employment and income for poor within the community while giving locals a platform to trial new farming techniques. They started to become wary and mistakenly thought we were introducing competition to the locals. After a couple of weeks, my pigs started vomiting and dying. I found out that villagers had poisoned the pigs and 40% of my livestock was lost that year! That cost us a 5-figure sum. Eventually, the villagers understood my intention and accepted that the pig farm was meant to benefit them. They then turned around to support and help protect it.

### **So there are no short cuts and quick wins?**

Short-term projects can be gratifying and I think we need to understand that social problems cannot be solved overnight. We are talking about a 20- to 40-year effort. Change takes years!

Let me give you a rough idea of how challenging this can be. Hmong villagers have grown up with the idea of cooking within their own houses, a fireplace is often in the middle of their homes and while they cook, ash and smoke fills the house. People in these houses develop severe respiratory problems and diseases after long term inhalation of the ash and smoke. Many elderly folks came to us for medical treatment and it is only when we visited their homes that we realised the cause of the problems. We explained how the ash and smoke from the firewood in their homes cause health problems and we urged them to move the stove out of their houses. They were terribly reluctant, fearing that their stoves will be stolen if they placed them outside of their houses.

After 4 to 5 years of creative messaging, an elderly villager finally tried this out and positive word of mouth on the benefits of so doing eventually spread across the village. My point is it took us 4 to 5 years to convince them to drop a cultural norm and adopt an alternative approach.

Eight years ago, my work was focused on providing immediate relief to enable the locals to get by. But relief is very temporal by nature and to create sustainable change, we knew we had to seriously look at longer-term developmental projects. Today, we couple both relief projects to serve as interim aid and development projects to strengthen the local capacity in areas like agriculture, life-skills and self care. It is our hope that these projects would nudge them toward sustainability and level the playing field for them.

### **How do you measure the success of your work?**

Our developmental projects have key indicators such as reduction of domestic violence rate to 30% from 40% or reducing juvenile drug use in the next 5 years. That said, each step is pivotal on the partners who come alongside us as well as the receptivity of the projects by the locals. This is also why we emphasize on local expertise to help design community development programmes collectively.

Working in rural communities is extremely difficult, especially when societal norms can differ largely from the developed world. As such, we conduct community surveys and focus groups every two years to keep track of domestic violence rates and prevalence of drug use among kids, to know where we are and what more needs to be done.

Through creative education, we hope to reduce juvenile drug use especially among school-going children. One of the projects we are working on is to make drug use "Uncool".

Like many of their Asian counterparts, the concept of 'face' or reputation and dignity is an important one among the Hmong. Given that the locals subscribe to this, we are working on creative projects to reduce the appeal of drugs and change it to something that is frowned upon.

### **What challenges have you faced?**

Many social organisations in developing countries tend to be palliative in nature. Few will go beyond handouts to solve problems. So building understanding around the idea of working towards sustainable change and getting continued support for long term projects can be very challenging.

The other challenge will be in attracting and retaining top talent. Talent from the social and business sectors are reluctant to cross over because the salary on the social side is a lot lower. This is compounded by the fact that people hold on to the perception that social workers should not be well compensated.

We do receive donation in-kind but we can't pay our staff with donation in-kind! While we do work with various corporations such as 3M, Crocs, DKS and Singapore Airlines on CSR projects, we also hope to encourage givers to move from giving out of convenience to deliberate and educated giving.

I attended a conference last year and something stuck with me. An owner of an airline company in the Middle East said, "NGOs need to understand business in order to achieve win-win partnerships." He then went on to share that more often than not, aircrafts tend to have spare cargo space. He mooted an idea to provide low-cost cargo space to humanitarian organisations to pre-position non time critical supplies to disaster prone regions. This way, the aircrafts can fly with maximum load and NGOs can tap on this spare capacity to fly items at minimal cost.

For CSR to create real value beyond driving publicity, the business and social sectors need to have genuine conversations.

### **Having been in this sector for eight years now, what are your reflections?**

NGOs are often forced to engage in “grey-marketing” to emphasize the power of one simple action, or donation. But real societal problems take collective effort and an immense amount of time. You see reports that carry impressive statistics of children removed from malnutrition or that 80% of all donations collected have been successfully channelled to villages. Yet, those who put out such reports hardly operate on ground to ensure that the resources are optimised and directed to solving real problems. There is little oversight on how the donations are being used to benefit the community on ground.

On the flip side, first world donors often don't want to read real stories. They prefer stories that put a warm feeling in their hearts without having to deal with the anguish of knowing societal problems and how they are contributing to change. Many would rather believe that a US\$50 donation could change the life of a kid.

I recently met with a group of young and enthusiastic Law students who wanted to teach villagers how to start a business, even though none of them had real-life experience in this field. I told them, “My dear friends, you have not run a business before. Why don't you consider contributing in ways that are closer to your field of knowledge and experience?” They did not like that comment and they later went on to partner another social organisation to carry out the plan.

In working with partners that provide medical care to the rural communities, we do get a fair bit of queries as to what “exotic” cases they will get to see in third world countries. Many well meaning professionals and students hope to do some good, but the poor don't exist to remind us of our privilege or their medical condition to expose us to “new and exotic” clinical cases.

### **What word of advice would you give to people who are thinking going into social sector?**

We need to be very sensitive when it comes to working with lives; we need to be mindful not to impose our opinions and expectation on communities that we serve. Long term change starts with trust.

Social work has to be more thoughtful. Sometimes, we get involved in easy, palatable charity projects that gratify our self-actualisation moments but do not bring about sustainable change. This reflects superficiality. We want to be seen to be giving back because it is convenient and it feels good, but we don't want to sink our feet in the mud. Some have no courage to see harsh realities.

Understand the problems first, then come up with solutions. It is more sustainable than deciding on the aid required and getting people to revolve around it. You need to be committed to your chosen cause and be prepared to invest years into it if you are truly serious about bringing change. The rock star or hero mentality has to fade. Social organisations need to be measured by long term impact, and not by status or overnight fame, or a warm fuzzy feeling after a trip to the third world.

### **About**

**Eugene Wee** is the founder and executive director of RADION International, a social impact organisation that provides humanitarian relief and delivers community developmental programmes among the Hmong community in Phetchabun, a province in northern Thailand.

RADION International is a humanitarian relief and development agency dedicated to serving the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. It currently works amongst hill tribe communities in Thailand spanning across 120 km in land distance. Its international headquarters are in Singapore, supported by a country office in Chiang Mai, Thailand and a field office in Phetchabun, Thailand. The organisation works to reach oppressed and needy communities through practical actions such as community development work and direct relief intervention.

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