

Schools rise above the flood waters

Human Interest Story

June 2017



*Students learn about the essential items inside an emergency bag
Photo by: ADPC*

Ang Thong, Thailand — Wat Thanon School in Pong Peng sub-district of Ang Thong province is affected by annual flooding due to its proximity to Chao Phraya River.

Chao Phraya is the major river of Thailand that flows through its capital, Bangkok. The river bursts its banks during the rainy season, bringing destruction to inhabitants, particularly to those inhabiting its banks.

Community exposure to annual flooding and the drowning of two children in 1995 aroused concern about the safety of school children in teacher, Thongraya Naiyachit, 59.

In the first incident, a child drowned in an inundated village. The second child was killed when a powerful current of flood water overturned the boat he was in.

With memories of these incidents etched deep in her mind, Ms. Thongraya was determined to raise awareness about the potential threat posed by annual flooding to the community and its children.

When Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) introduced “Program for Reduction of Vulnerability to Flood in Thailand” at her school in 2016, Ms. Thongraya realized there was more she could do to strengthen preparedness efforts, particularly at the individual and community level.

Wat Thanon School is one of two schools selected for the pilot program on school flood risk management funded by the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). ADPC team worked with teachers and educational staff to design activities that accommodated their needs and the local context.

In doing so, facilitators from ADPC chose focal points to participate in a disaster risk reduction (DRR) training course in Samut Songkram province.

The course covered basic disaster concepts and the importance of adding these concepts to the primary school education system. Specialized facilitators from the Ministry of Education’s Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Department, Save the Children, and Ramathibodi Hospital attended the course.



Mr. Lhechai Homsuwan teaches students on the proper way to save someone from drowning
Photo by: ADPC

The penny drops

After the training, two of the teachers relayed the most crucial information throughout the school and pushed for lessons to become part of their academic activities.

“We used to take this type of information for granted, but after going through the training and program activities, we’ve realized that this information can save lives. We can help our students and others in a more comprehensive way,” said Ms. Thongraya. “We can see its value and the importance of integrating these lessons into the classroom.”

Making flood preparedness a norm

ADPC and teachers at Wat Thanon School surveyed the students’ ability to swim, and were surprised to find that more than 75% were unable to swim despite living in a flood-risk area. It was also learned that many parents had prohibited their children from swimming out of fear that they might drown.

Having discovered this chink in the armor of the community’s disaster preparedness, the need for action to enhance the students’ preparedness to potential risks was warranted.

A jaw-dropping disclosure

During the life safety camp attended by 244 students, a teacher at Wat Thanon School in Pong Peng, Mr. Lhechai Homsuwan, 31, watched over students discussing how

to act if they see someone drowning. To his horror, most students did not know how to save a drowning person despite experiencing floods on an annual basis.

When facilitators asked the students what they would do in this situation, many said they would jump in to help the person— an erroneous, if not deadly course of action.

The proper way to save someone from drowning is to solicit help from others and provide assistance until help arrives by means of tools such as a long stick or floating objects to support and fish the person out.

“The best way for students to learn is to give them the opportunity to practice in a simulated situation. So when they encounter such situations in real life, they have proper knowledge about how to save themselves and others,” said Mr. Lhechai.

Swimming classes were introduced for students from grades 1 to 9 as part of the project to equip them with survival skills in the event of a major flood.

“My house gets flooded every year because it is next to the river. But I couldn’t swim until I learned it in the class recently,” said 12-year-old Suchasinee. She was among the students who participated in the swimming class. “It’s much more fun when I can learn by doing an activity,” she said.

Sharing experiences through booklets

One of the activities conducted during the project was to have students make booklets to share their experiences with floods, coping mechanisms, and needs for solutions.

Students drew and colored booklets, and created 3D paper crafts. Their work was then put on display at libraries and shared with organizations such as the Pong Peng Sub-District Administration Organization and the Pong Peng Sub-District Health Promoting Hospital Administrative Office to help raise awareness about how people are affected by floods.

Being one’s own first responder

Throughout the program, students learned essential skills to increase their chances of survival during severe floods and gained a better perspective on disaster preparedness activities. They have realized the utility of things like safety tools- no longer is a fire extinguisher just another item, but rather a useful tool that can be utilized during emergencies. Teachers have also observed changes in the students’ attitude, thanks to the program. Students now immediately report risk elements at their school, such as exposed electricity wires, to their teachers.

The lessons learned also extend to the teachers in that they have become more determined to integrate practical lifesaving lessons into their classes.

“The program has impacted both students and teachers,” said Wat Thanon School Director Ms. Wittaya Ratanatarakorn.



Teachers trained on Integrated Flood Risk Reduction presented their curriculum session design
Photo by: ADPC

Feather in the school's cap

Following the completion of program, Wat Thanon School became a model educational institution for flood risk reduction in Thailand.

Their efforts were so commendable that Save the Children Thailand acknowledged the school for having one of the best practices in the country.

Owing to its success, other schools have since expressed interest in adopting the school's activities to raise their own understanding of disaster preparedness.

Continuing into the future

Wat Thanon School plans to continue flood preparedness and life safety campaigns as an annual activity. The school administration made this decision after the project proved successful in raising the students' and teachers' awareness of floods and other potential risks.

In 2015, the Ministry of Education introduced the policy of "reducing class time, adding learning time" to encourage teachers to introduce more practical life skills to students, which include activities to reduce risks during disasters.

Through this policy, Mr. Ratanatarakorn plans to add disaster risk reduction and lifesaving topics to extra-curricular classes to continue teaching students the value of preparedness.

When asked about funding to support this initiative, Mr. Ratanatarakorn said it depended on enrolment.

"The funding received must be spent on overall school operations and activities, making it difficult for us to obtain budget for extra activities," he explained.

Despite this challenge, preparedness activities are scheduled to continue, as ADPC's program has inspired the school administration and students by demonstrating how disaster preparedness can be informative, practical and the primary determinant of survival or death.

Program for Reduction of Vulnerability to Floods in Thailand

Project information: ADPC - supported by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) - initiated a five-year program for 'Reduction of Vulnerability to Floods in Thailand' to enhance flood risk mitigation and management. The program goal is to promote sustainable development while enhancing Thailand's resilience to floods and other associated natural hazards. It achieves this goal by strengthening the capacity for disaster risk management in Thailand and providing support for flood vulnerability reduction. The program works in partnership with Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, and other stakeholders and target provinces in the central and lower Chao Phraya River Basin.

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