

Opening Speech of The 2001 Year-end Conference on "Poverty Reduction Strategies"*

by

H.E. Mr. Anand Panyarachun**

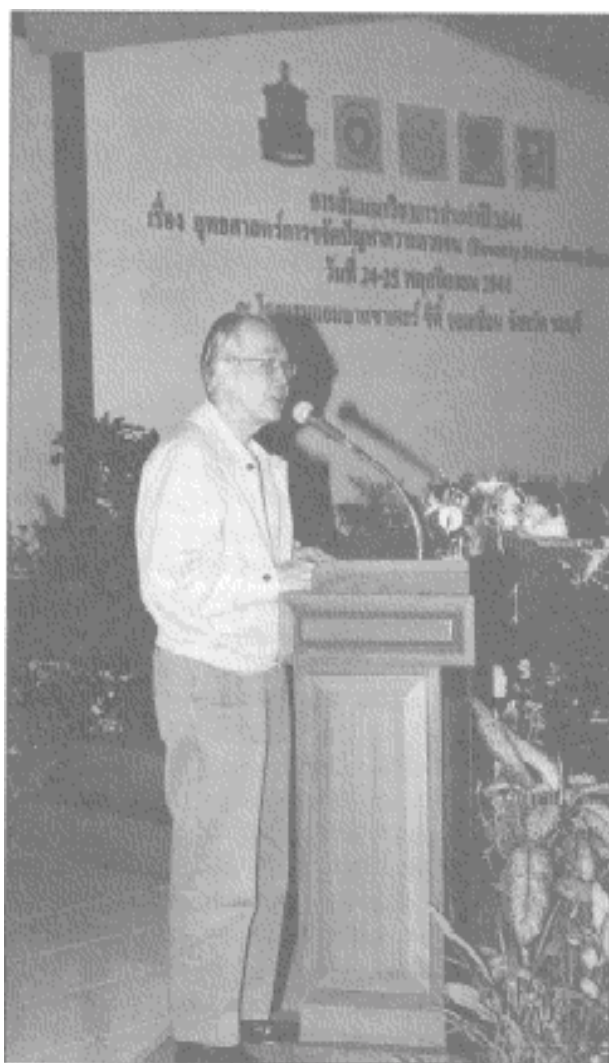
This is a translation of speech given at the Opening Session of the 2001 Year-end Conference on "Poverty Reduction Strategies," co-organized by the Chai Pattana Foundation, the Community Organizations Development Institute, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, the Bureau of the Budget, and the Thailand Development Research Institute, at the Ambassador City, Jomtien, Chon Buri, November 24-25, 2001.

Honored Guests,

I am very pleased that the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), in association with the Chai Pattana Foundation, the Community Organizations Development Institute, the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, generally known as the NESDB, and the Bureau of the Budget, is organizing the 2001 Year-end Conference on "Poverty Reduction Strategies," starting today.

First of all I would like to welcome my member colleagues from the Economic and Social Advisory Council, of which I am Chairman. This organization was established about four or five months ago, in accordance with the present Constitution, and this year is the first occasion that the TDRI has invited members of the Economic and Social Advisory Council to take part in the Year-end Conference. Appropriately, the topic of today's Conference which is poverty, must be of special interest to development organizations, whether they be of the government sector, the private sector or the people sector.

I believe it a very good omen that different organizations, for example, from the government sector the core ones such as the NESDB and the Bureau of the Budget, from the research sector such as the TDRI, and from the organizations which have produced concrete results in the development and well being of the rural areas and communities such as the Chai Pattana Foundation and the Community Organizations Development



Institute, have joined hands in organizing this Conference. Without working together along the same direction and without supporting one another from every sector, the serious, complex and sensitive problem of poverty will be most difficult to solve or even to be reduced. Poverty brings with it a feeling of insecurity in life, causing fear and fright—a condition of people without freedom. Even ignoring the fact that poverty brings

* This speech is translated into English by Mr. Viravudhi Vajrabhaya.

** H.E. Mr. Anand Panyarachun is Chairman of the TDRI Council of Trustees and the Board of Directors.

about all kinds of economic problems and social ills, when millions of our population are living under such a condition, our society is already suffering from erosion and imbalance. It is therefore the duty of everyone of us to reduce as much as possible the number of people living in such poverty.

From the time I started my career several decades ago as a civil servant, I remember that poverty eradication has been an important policy of the government of every age and era. It can be said that such a policy is, to use current terms, a people's policy. It is an age-old problem but, while statistics generally showed a continuous reduction of poverty in Thailand during the decade 1987-1997, why does this problem still remain very serious? We have to ask ourselves what the problem is and how we are going to get to the heart of the problem to solve it.

Firstly, I would like to make an observation. Poverty today looks different from that of the time when the people of my age were children or were young or were familiar with. This is due to the fact that the conditions causing poverty, or which make a person feel destitute, impoverished and hopeless, have become more complex. Currently those who suffer from "lack of money" also suffer from "lack of opportunities," "lack of knowledge" and "lack of quality of life." In reverse, those suffering from "lack of opportunities" and "lack of knowledge" eventually cannot avoid suffering from "lack of money." This is our first issue.

My second observation is: throughout the past 40 years, we have been aiming at the growth of our economy, expecting that the economic growth would bring about income, which, in turn, would help reduce poverty. This concept is not a wrong concept. However, during such a process in the past 30 years, we did not include the management of certain aspects, resulting in a widening of the income gap between the rich and the poor. The wider the income gap, the slower the development of Thailand in general, and the country lacks stability. The chance of the poor enjoying a better life through economic growth is proportionately reduced. Moreover, the widening of the income gap between the rich and the poor usually leads to other social problems, such as the problem of conflict, violence and crimes. What I have just said does not occur only within the national context, but also in the international arena, in terms of international relations. According to the history of the last 100 years, the gap between a rich and a poor country, was already noticeable in the old days, yet it has become more widened at present, in the same way as the gap between the rich and the poor in the national society. Therefore, as the gap widens at the international level, the outcome is just what I have mentioned earlier, that is to say, conflicts in the principles and in the policies of free trade, in the policy of globalization, conflicts arising from inferiority, indiginity, landlessness of individuals or of nations. As regards international politics, recent events in Afghanistan is another consequence, perhaps not a direct one, but nevertheless a consequence of the conditions between the rich and the poor countries. It

arises from the condition of having no rights—the right of having one's own land, the right of living within one's national boundary with confidence and security. Whenever there is a conflict, there will be violence and other problems will follow. Therefore, the problem of income gap, between countries, between individuals or between regions, should receive our special attention.

How can we reduce the income gap? Experiences from all over the world show that the important factors are the policies of the state, the government policies, including the direction of development, the increase of opportunities and potentials of individuals and societies, as well as the increase in the participation of people of every group, every area and every region in the society, particularly the poor.

Now comes my third observation. Though the policy direction of the state is very important in solving the poverty problem, it is not sufficient to rely on the policy or wait for the action from the government sector, or leave it to the government to manage it all. Not only is it not sufficient, but it is also dangerous. It means waiting for external factors, like in a dream. Right now we cannot tell whether it is a dream with a vision or merely a sweet dream; but we will wait for uncertainties. The reduction of poverty must be viewed from several levels. At the level of individuals, it may be an attempt on self-reliance or an extensive search by oneself for opportunities. At the community level, co-operative grouping should be formed to gain strength and enable the learning process. At the level of state policy, effort and co-operation should be built up at all the three sectors participating in the development process, i.e., the government sector, the business sector and the people's sector. It is most important to listen to the poor themselves. This is the key to the strategies which are practical and sustainable in solving the problem of poverty.

Yesterday I read an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on the solving of the fishery problems along the southern coast which have continued for several years. Recently, 170 private organizations, mostly small ones, joined together to solve the problems by themselves, without the state taking any part, and they succeeded in their effort. One aspect is interesting. These private organizations were set up within their own localities, out of the goodwill and concern of the people who wish to safeguard the local interest, without any direction from the higher-ups, or any persuasion from private organizations from the central region. What is significant is the fact that they remain small organizations but which have joined their hands. Were they to become too large, the meaning of being a people's organization, in the true sense, would soon be lost. They would equally be drawn into the bureaucratic system, that is, the working process or indeed the thinking process would be similar to that of a ministry.

In my life, I have been quite frustrated by the bi-polarization of the Thai society, which appears to be greater than in other societies. Problems, or issues, or situations, are viewed superficially. The bi-polarization

To reflect the viewpoints of the poor and the deprived as much as possible, the first session of the conference "Voice of the Poor" featured a video presentation and a panel discussion by representatives of the poor.



takes place, whether it be in the political ideology or in the economic ideology, as in the past. In the current decade, the global trend or the trend of the Thai society is likewise bi-polarized, that is, the bi-polarization between the rich and the poor. It is not merely between the rich and the poor in terms of wealth, but also in terms of opportunities, of knowledge and the learning process, and in terms of life patterns. Hence, now is probably the time for us to search for ways to solve this problem. At least there are four ways, namely:

First, reduce the number of the poor in money, either by assistance measures provided by the state, or by creating whatever opportunities possible in order to increase their income and decrease expenditure. The income must exceed the expenditure, and the conditions for raising the income or the expenditure should not depend solely on actual money.

Second, sever or weaken the relationship between "money," "opportunity," "knowledge" and "life pattern." We must guard against allowing poverty in one area to bring about or reflect poverty in another area.

Third, build up "opportunity," "knowledge" and "life pattern" which can work smoothly and sufficiently in a community, particularly in a way that money need not be the only leading condition.

Lastly, set up conditions in the society—conditions which would reduce the social gap as much as possible, whether in terms of money, income, opportunity, knowledge and ability to lead a life of quality and sufficiency.

In my view, one of the main causes of poverty in the city is poverty in the rural area, and the main cause of poverty in the rural area is lack of arable land. Also, the conditions for earning a living have changed. The poor have only manual labor to offer, and they are employed without permanent sources of income. They have to change their ways of life. Many have to migrate, changing from poor rural life to city life which they hope would be better. Once in the city, they would find out that being poor in the city has numerous limitations, and various social problems follow.

What can we do to enable every Thai citizen, even without money, to own a small piece of land, in an environment conducive to leading a life of sufficiency? What conditions should be set to enable the poor to be self-sufficient, to have an opportunity to live in this society with dignity, not as beggars, but able to confront unforeseen circumstances with reasonable stability? It is true that men are not born with the same degree of preparedness, but society must provide everyone with equal opportunity, or almost equal opportunity—opportunities to search for knowledge and education, to seek life opportunities, to participate in giving opinions, in making decisions and taking actions. The poor need not be deprived of opportunities or to stay poor forever. It is not a matter of being rewarded for past good deeds and punished for past bad deeds. These conditions must be created, and we must create them in our society.

My final observation is the following. As you are fully aware, the problem of poverty cannot be separated from other social problems. Likewise, the topic of the Year-end Conference of one year cannot be entirely isolated from those of other years. In 1998 we discussed the topic "From Crisis to Sustainable Development," and in 1999 "Sufficiency Economy" was the topic. Last year it was "Transparent and Uncorrupt Society," or in simple Thai, the problem of corruption. The objective of the Conference organizers is to set in motion a continuous process to reach the same goal, that is, the problem of sustainable development, which will enable the members of the society to live in peace, in a society which is just, which honors one and all, and in which everyone enjoys an equal opportunity to develop oneself to attain better things in life.

Another important objective of the Year-end Conference is to set up a forum for every participant to discuss and exchange experiences in the conference room, in the hotel lobby, or at dining tables. Such interaction is meant to inspire people to solve problems, and to develop a sense of involvement, a feeling that one is not trying to solve the problem alone, that there are others who are doing their duties. I hope that our Con-

ference will be the starting point and will continue to promote the exchange of ideas on the issue of poverty, leading onto concrete and sustainable co-operative actions. It is my hope, therefore, that after our departure from Pattaya this time, we will have identified measures, and most importantly, networks—networks of individuals and of organizations whose ways of thinking and operational directions are in line with one another. We will also have identified ways to put into operation these measures and strategies and refine them further so as to move forward toward appropriate operational actions.

This Conference is attempting to reflect the viewpoints of the poor and the deprived as much as possible. In fact this year, as Chairman of the Institute's Council, I pleaded with the organizers not to ask me to speak and to declare the Conference opened. I wish that at this gathering, the person who opens this Conference or makes the opening speech would be truly a representative of the poor. All of you must be quite bored having to listen to my speeches in the past 10 years. Even I myself sometimes get bored listening to my own voice. I would like to listen to voices of others, particularly the voice and true feeling of those deprived of opportunities in their lives. In the end we found a way out. They asked me to speak but not for too long. But what is important this morning is that we will have a videotape reflecting the voice of the poor. This videotape will in fact be the official opening of the Conference today. In preparation for this Conference, we have also encouraged community members to analyze the poverty situation in their

localities. Workshops were organized twice to hear the viewpoints of the representatives of the poor and researchers were sent out to collect and analyze data by actually living in 10 villages in various regions for two months. The TDRI is interested in the views of others, since we consider that any individual, whoever he or she may be, has the right to give opinions, and the TDRI considers it our duty and responsibility to listen and to hear. What the deprived in our society want is listeners who listen to what they say. Do not be suspicious of their reasons. Do not suspect that they have anything to hide, or something bad. Do not suspect that they are enemies or foes. But we should listen to them, listen as fellow human beings. If we do not listen to them, they may express themselves in ways which may not be appropriate, whether by marching on the streets or by blocking the traffic, which in the end would not do any good to anybody, and may cause violence, conflict, casualties, and, most importantly, more and more distrust, thus thinning the thread that ties our society into one. Whenever the thread snaps, our beloved society, encompassing the rich, the poor, or the rich today poor tomorrow, or the poor today and rich tomorrow—a society which, we hope, will be livable, may not be livable any longer. These are the observations that I would like to make today.

Now that the appropriate time has come, I declare open the Year-end Conference of 2001.

Thank you.