Family Planning in Thailand: 
A Success Story

donw a narrow lane off Bangkok's busy Sukhumvit Road, is a most unusual café. Called Cabbages and Condoms, it's not only highly rated for its spicy Thai food, but it's also the only restaurant in the world dedicated to birth control. In an adjoining gift shop, baskets of condoms stand next to decorative handicrafts of the northern hill tribes. Piles of T-shirts carry messages, such as, "A condom a day keeps the doctor away," and "Our food is guaranteed not to cause pregnancy." Both businesses are run by the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), Thailand's largest and most influential nongovernmental organization.

The PDA was founded in 1974 by Mechai Viravaidya, a genial and fun-loving former Thai Minister of Health, who is a genius at public relations and human motivation (fig. 4.1). While traveling around Thailand in the early 1970s, Mechai recognized that rapid population growth—particularly in poor rural areas—was an obstacle to community development. Rather than lecture people about their behavior, Mechai decided to use humor to promote family planning. PDA workers handed out condoms at theaters and traffic jams, anywhere a crowd gathered. They challenged governmental officials to condom balloon-blowing contests, and taught youngsters Mechai's condom song: "Too Many Children Make You Poor." The PDA even pays farmers to paint birth control ads on the sides of their water buffalo.

This campaign has been extremely successful at making birth control and family planning, which once had been taboo topics in polite society, into something familiar and unembarrassing. Although condoms—now commonly called "mechais" in Thailand—are the trademark of PDA, other contraceptives, such as pills, spermicidal foam, and IUDs, are promoted as well. Thailand was one of the first countries to allow the use of the injectable contraceptive DMPA, and remains a major user. Free non-scalpel vasectomies are available on the king's birthday. Sterilization has become the most widely used form of contraception in the country. The campaign to encourage condom use has also been helpful in combating AIDS.

In 1974, when PDA started, Thailand's growth rate was 3.2 percent per year. In just 15 years, contraceptive use among married couples increased from 15 to 70 percent, and the growth rate had dropped to 1.6 percent, one of the most dramatic birth rate declines ever recorded. Now Thailand's growth rate is 0.7 percent, which is significantly lower than the United States. The fertility rate (or average number of children per woman) in Thailand decreased from 7 in 1974 to 1.7 in 2006. The PDA is credited with the fact that Thailand's population is 20 million less than it would have been if it had followed its former trajectory.

In addition to Mechai's creative genius and flair for showmanship, there are several reasons for this success story. Thai people love humor and are more egalitarian than most developing countries. Thai spouses share in decisions regarding children, family life, and contraception. The government recognizes the need for family planning and is willing to work with volunteer organizations, such as the PDA. And Buddhism, the religion of 95 percent of Thais, promotes family planning.

The PDA hasn't limited itself to family planning and condom distribution. It has expanded into a variety of economic development projects. Microlending provides money for a couple of pigs, or a bicycle, or a small supply of goods to sell at the market. Thousands of water-storage jars and cement rainwater-catchment basins have been distributed. Larger scale community development grants include road building, rural electrification, and irrigation projects. Mechai believes that human development and economic security are keys to successful population programs.

This case study introduces several important themes of this chapter. What might be the effects of exponential growth in human populations? How might we manage fertility and population growth? And what are the links between poverty, birth rates, and our common environment? Keep in mind, as you read this chapter, that resource limits aren't simply a matter of total number of people on the planet, they also depend on consumption levels and the types of technology used to produce the things we use.