

THAILAND

The man who made a taboo funny

Mechai Viravaidya used jokes and village games to break a taboo in Thailand. It helped slow AIDS.

WHERE	Bangkok
WHO	Mechai Viravaidya, a Thai economist and activist who used humour to promote family planning and HIV prevention
WHEN	1974 to 2012

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In the early 1970s, Thailand had a problem nobody wanted to talk about. Its population was growing by more than 3 percent a year. Families were large. Birth control was something people did not discuss.

Mechai Viravaidya, an economist, decided to take the subject on. His aim was to make condoms as ordinary as soap, toothpaste and dried fish in a village market. He knew people would only accept them if they could smile about them.

> **Would you rather be sensitive, or dead?**
>
> MECHAI VIRAVAIDYA, ON COUNTRIES WHERE PEOPLE ARE SHY ABOUT CONDOMS, IN NEPALI TIMES

Humour as a tool

Mechai toured villages with stunts. He held contests and called out, “Who can blow up the biggest condom?” He opened family planning “supermarkets” at bus stations. He persuaded Buddhist monks to bless condoms. In Bangkok, he offered free vasectomies near the palace to celebrate the king’s birthday.

There was serious work behind the jokes. He trained a network of 350,000 teachers and 12,000 village leaders. A newspaper columnist tried to insult him by suggesting that condoms be called “mechais”. The

name stuck, and Mechai framed the article. He also opened a restaurant, Cabbages and Condoms, whose profits fund his work.

350,000

teachers trained to spread the message

0.6%

yearly population growth in 2005, down from over 3% in 1974

90%

fall in new HIV infections, according to the United Nations

A second crisis

In the late 1980s, AIDS reached Thailand. The government refused to back a safe-sex campaign, because it feared harm to sex tourism. So Mechai turned to the military. It agreed to broadcast safe-sex messages on its 300 radio stations and five television stations.

In 1991, a new prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, brought Mechai into government. Every government department was asked to help with AIDS education. Taxi drivers handed out condoms, and traffic police gave them to drivers. In Bangkok's sex industry, condom use rose from 30 to 90 percent in seven years.

The World Bank estimated that the programme saved 7.7 million lives between 1991 and 2012. The World Health Organization called it the quickest response to the problem it had ever seen.

How it unfolded

- **1974** Mechai starts the Population and Community Development Association.
- **1991** A new prime minister brings him into government to lead AIDS prevention.
- **2005** Population growth is down to 0.6 percent a year.
- **2012** The World Bank's estimate of 7.7 million lives saved covers 1991 to 2012.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

He treated embarrassment as the real problem, and used laughter to remove it.

He did not work alone. Teachers, monks, the military and government departments all helped the message reach people.

OUR TAKE

Mechai showed that a taboo can be broken with laughter, patience and many helpers.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Make the hard topic easy to talk about

He used games, jokes and contests so people could relax.

Try this: Pick a topic people avoid. Find one friendly way to start the talk.

2 Take “no” as a question

Mechai says he asked himself whether he had explained badly, and kept going.

Try this: When someone says no, ask whether you explained it clearly. Try again.

3 Find allies who can say yes

When the government refused, the military agreed to broadcast the messages.

Try this: If one door is closed, list who else can help. Ask them.

4 Act before the crisis peaks

Nepali Times says he saw by 1987 that Thailand was heading for disaster.

Try this: Name one small risk today and act on it before it grows.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Laughter can open a door that fear keeps shut.

Sources

Population Connection (reprint of The New York Times)
'Captain Condom' Turned the Tide in Thailand's War on AIDS and Overpopulation (2022)

University of Warwick
Family planning pioneer reflects on influencing a nation's birth control habits (2017)

Nepali Times
Thailand's Mr Condom comes to Kathmandu (2001)

Wikipedia
Mechai Viravaidya

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on some numbers. Family size: the story does not give a figure, because the New York Times piece says the average family had five children in the early 1970s and fell to fewer than two, while Wikipedia and the University of Warwick say 7 fell to 1.5. Population growth: the New York Times says more than 3 percent in 1974 and 0.6 percent in 2005; Warwick says over 3 percent and 0.5 percent by 2003; the story uses the New York Times figures. When the Population and Community Development Association began: Warwick says 1974, Wikipedia says 1973, the New York Times says nearly 50 years before 2022; the story uses 1974 in the timeline. His government role in 1991: the New York Times calls him minister of information and tourism; Wikipedia calls him minister for tourism, information and AIDS; the story says only that the prime minister brought him into government. Lives saved: the New York Times and Warwick give the World Bank estimate of 7.7 million lives saved (Warwick says within 12 years; the New York Times says between 1991 and 2012); a search summary mentioned 9.7 million, but that figure was not found in any page that was opened, so it is not used. The 90 percent fall in new infections is credited to the United Nations (New York Times) or UNAIDS

(Warwick). Condom use in Bangkok's sex industry rising from 30 to 90 percent in seven years is from Nepali Times (2001). The 350,000 teachers and 12,000 village leaders, the bus-station "supermarkets", the blessing by monks, the free vasectomies near the palace on the king's birthday, the columnist who suggested "mechais", the 300 radio and five television stations of the military, the refusal of the government to back a campaign because of sex tourism, and taxi drivers and police handing out condoms are from the New York Times piece; the New York Times quotes Mechai saying condoms were given out in taxis and by policemen in traffic. The World Health Organization's "quickest response" is quoted in the New York Times. The restaurant Cabbages and Condoms is in Wikipedia, Nepali Times and a New York Times photo caption (profits fund his work). The quote "Would you rather be sensitive, or dead?" is from Nepali Times (2001). That he saw the danger by 1987 is from Nepali Times. That he asks whether he explained badly, and takes "no" as a question, is from Warwick. The WHO and World Bank pages themselves could not be opened, and the story relies on the news pieces for those claims. The pin shows Bangkok. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.