

*Population and Reproductive Health
Oral History Project*

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Mechai Viravaidya

Interviewed by
Deborah McFarlane

October 6, 2003
Bangkok, Thailand

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Narrator

Kuhn Mechai Viravaidya (b. 1941) is the founder and executive director of the Population and Development Association (PDA) in Bangkok, Thailand. Known affectionately as Mr. Condom, Senator Mechai is widely credited for the sharp decrease in fertility in Thailand as well as the dramatic rise in safe sex, which has thwarted an AIDS/HIV epidemic. See his biography by Thomas D'Agnes, *From Condoms to Cabbages*.

Interviewer

Deborah R. McFarlane is professor of political science at the University of New Mexico. She is the author, with K.J. Meier, of *The Politics of Fertility Control: Family Planning and Abortion Politics in the American States* (Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001). McFarlane worked as an administrator and a consultant in reproductive health in the U.S. and internationally for more than three decades.

Restrictions

None

Format

Two 60-minute audiocassettes.

Transcript

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Transcript

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McFarlane

This is Deborah McFarlane in Bangkok, Thailand, with Mechai Viravaidya. You've done remarkable work in family planning, population, HIV/AIDS, and community economic development, which is explained in Tom D'Agnes's book *From Condoms to Cabbages*. Do you think that the population issue is settled or solved in Thailand?

Viravaidya

Well, in terms of the qualifying aspects of it, one would say yes. We used to have seven children per family, say, in 1970. And today—five years ago, in fact—we have only 1.6 children per family. Population growth from about 3.3 percent [per] annum down to 0.8. So anyone who studies demography would tell you that's a very, very significant decline, especially over a period of about twenty-eight years. Yes, we've done—in terms of bringing down the numbers of children per family, the attitude of the people towards family size, that's very clear. But if we were to say, "Well, we don't need to do anymore," then we would be wrong because there's a lot more that needs to be done on the quality side.

And before we talk about family planning and population—naturally, of course, it's connected to sex. That's how you get pregnant. That's how you

have children. But nowadays, sex is far more intricate in terms of its risks and dangers because now you have HIV/AIDS as well. Then you could make a mistake and you could get over it, but now with HIV/AIDS, you make a mistake and that's a death sentence. So we've done a lot, but a lot more still needs to be done on the qualitative side, educational side, so that people's understanding is better and better and better. And you can never overeducate people on knowledge about self and about society and about population issues, environmental issues. It's all connected.

McFarlane And that's an ongoing process.

Viravaidya Yes. And even just on family planning alone: a lot of people know very clearly, "I do not wish to have more than one or two children". But if you ask about their knowledge, it may fail in some areas, because Thailand, as a whole, has sort of softened its education approach to family planning because of thinking, Oh, we don't need to do it. But we still have to do it in terms of allowing the people to understand entirely what each method is, how it's applied, what is wrong information and what is right information.

McFarlane What do you mean by "softened its education"?

Viravaidya Well, before, we used to have a very, very strong public education and in schools about the need for family planning, for families to have a number of children they can care for, basically to try and get them to limit the number of children. And so here is sort of the family planning method until the IUD [intra-uterine device], sterilization, et cetera, et cetera. Nowadays, that's gone. Unless you search for it yourself, it's not around. So we just need to make it a bit more public and more obvious than parenting.

McFarlane Why is it gone? I mean, what happened?

Viravaidya Well, when government runs things, they think when you've paved the road, that's the end of it. It's the beginning of the project, ending of the project, there's a receipt, and it's done.

McFarlane What is PDA's [Population and Community Development Association] role here?

Viravaidya Well, we, unfortunately, are not government—or fortunately—but we don't have their resources. Thailand is certainly not a receptive country of foreign assistance.

McFarlane It's not?

Viravaidya It's not. We are not regarded as officially poor. Let me give you an example of two countries. Sweden makes a lot of profit from Thailand in terms of the Volvo cars they sell and the Ericsson telephone system, to name a couple, yet they give no assistance to Thailand because they say we're not poor enough. Australia receives the largest number of Thai students to any foreign country, and their foreign assistance is down to a very, very small amount because they just say, Well, on average, when you add all the rich and poor people together, no one is that poor.

But when you separate it out, you will see out of sixty million people, we have six million, which is 10 percent, living on under one U.S. dollar a day. Now those are the people who should be the recipients of assistance from countries that are richer and countries that have made so many riches within the boundaries of this country.

McFarlane Is the government rich enough to do it here?

Viravaidya

No government is rich enough. And even if it's rich, sometimes it makes mistakes and it puts emphasis on different things, wrong things. And they think they're right, and of course, we think we're right. Always the government spending on many issues is inadequate. That's why, even in America, you go to the private foundations, and you're the richest country in the world, yet you have a very, very large philanthropic sector. And so, doing it in Thailand is not anywhere near that. So even if the government is rich, it never does enough. It often spends on the wrong things, such as arms and wars.

McFarlane

Iraq. (laughs) What about the HIV/AIDS situation here?

Viravaidya

Well, Thailand was like every Asian country, denying the problem existed, not having political, therefore financial commitment to act on it. In fact, they said that if we were open and honest about tackling the AIDS issue, it would be very, very bad for our tourism. People would not come, et cetera, et cetera. But as it turned out, it's the reverse.

So in about 1991, we had a very, very strong campaign in the new government. But all the work had been done by PDA previously, and I was asked to join the cabinet. And I just took what we had done at PDA into the government, convinced our prime minister and our cabinet that this was a major threat to not only our population, our society, but the colony as well because at the time—this is in 1990, 1991—we thought that by the year 2000, we would have about four million HIV-positive people and we did nothing about it. But because of what was done, and it's being studied by people, they have concluded that Thailand had been able to prevent about three million

people from being infected over this period, so we've saved three out of four million. We have combined those who are already dead and those that are HIV-positive. It's about a million today. So yes, it's come down about 75 percent, and every year since then new cases have become smaller and smaller and smaller, but we still have HIV-positive [people].

Now, this thing happened also not only in family planning, but on HIV/AIDS. Over the last two and a half years, the government expenditure on public education and prevention has come down drastically, while the money was hijacked towards care because care has a face, has a voice, and prevention doesn't. And this happens in many, many countries. Same thing again. So no government is ever rich enough or wise enough to continue pushing the program. I think once the message is explained to the people, when a behavior change occurs, that's the end. We need to do it no more. We could have followed Coca Cola—keep on doing it.

McFarlane

Are there aspects of *From Condoms to Cabbages* and its description of the HIV epidemic and your work that you'd like to expand on?

Viravaidya

Well, again, what we said was that HIV is not a medical problem, it's a behavioral problem, a societal problem, a development problem. And it's not the confines or sole responsibility of just the medical profession, it is the job of everyone who can influence behavior to be involved in this prevention. So in Thailand, when I was part of the government cabinet, we made money. In fact, we increased the AIDS budget by fiftyfold in the first year and we gave it to every ministry, even to the judges, because when they pass a sentence on youth, they can talk about HIV/AIDS as well.

McFarlane

And did they?

Viravaidya

Yes. So everyone that was involved in contact—be it in agriculture, be it in education, be it in interior—everyone had a role in passing on the message to the people in urban and rural settings. We have education in schools starting in primary school at fourth grade all the way up to the university, in the workplace, in the offices, in the villages. Gas stations were involved, helping to print AIDS information in what we called AIDS Safety Tips, and also giving out condoms. We had Avon ladies walking around selling their products with a special AIDS Safety Tips, printed by Avon, with the message of Avon on one side and knowledge about HIV/AIDS on the other side. Insurance companies, banks, everyone was involved. We even had policemen giving out condoms with parking tickets. We called that a Cops and Rubbers program. (McFarlane laughs)

So we got everyone involved. We then made condoms available all over the place. Say, “It’s a lifesaver.” We have restaurants that give out condoms—has the name of the condom, has condoms on the wall. We now have two or three resorts by the name Cabbages and Condoms. We have not chocolates on the pillow but condoms under the pillow, and we give condoms after the meal. So we just keep on going, saying that in every aspect, you can use public education in important issues about family planning, about sex education, or about HIV/AIDS.

McFarlane

How did you increase the budget fiftyfold?

Viravaidya

Oh, just as a government—just took it from somewhere else and put it into this area.

McFarlane Was it hard to convince people?

Viravaidya No, no, when you are sitting and you are in control, it's not so difficult. (McFarlane laughs) When you're not in control, it's a bit more difficult.

McFarlane One of the consequences, of course, of both population growth and economic development is environmental degradation. Can you discuss your perspective here?

Viravaidya Oh, we know very well. I mentioned to Prince Phillip when I was on the international board of the—in those days, we called it the World Wildlife Fund; now today, it's called the Worldwide Fund for Nature—I said, “If you don't have family planning, all of the people will eat your pandas.” That brings the message home very, very clearly. We're very aware of it. You need to do family planning and you need to provide an alternative source of income. And at the same time, when people have an empty stomach, they've got to look around for something to fill their stomach, if it means shooting animals or cutting down trees to sell. But if they have a living, and especially if that living comes partly from protecting the forest or natural environment, then it's sustainable, and that's always been our approach.

We have programs that you plant trees in sort of denuded forests. Every tree is twenty-five cents into a micro-credit fund in the village. If you plant twenty thousand trees, you've got quite a sum. And we count again next year. Every living tree, twenty-five cents, dead tree, minus fifty cents, to make sure they're protected. After three years, the trees are big enough to take care of themselves. Then you have a pretty sensible and sizable micro-credit fund that was brought on by environmental protection. So how can you turn the

activities around that generate hope and generate resources or capital formation from protecting the forests, instead of saying, “don’t cut down trees”^s? Because of course, I’m going to cut down that tree and sell it. I have no other choice.

McFarlane Well, Thailand has special challenges here with economic development. Is that correct?

Viravaidya Well, Thailand has come out of its economic difficulties in 1997 as everybody in Asia suffered. It’s moving along 6 percent growth a year the last couple of years now. It seems to be going well, quite well. But the key issue is the redistribution of income, the disparity that’s still gigantic. And what we have to do is try to close the gap. And one of the things we’ve been doing at PDA since we’re not getting foreign assistance—and as it turns out, it’s a blessing in disguise—we call it the Privatization of Poverty Reduction.

McFarlane Tell me about that.

Viravaidya Right around the world now, many, many governments are selling off state businesses to the private sector. They call it privatization because they believe it can be run more efficiently by the business sector than the government sector. So airlines, post office, rail—America has done it from the beginning, but others have seen it as the state, and they’ve been selling it off. That’s the belief that things are done better by the private sector.

And my point about poverty reduction is similar [in] that I think it can be done better by the private or business sector. And I get to that point by demonstrating first that we have failed around the world in our poverty reduction, because we’ve only looked at the poor in one dimension. They’re

poor, therefore deserving of help, and therefore charity. So the government officials, governing departments use a welfare approach.

So the wrong doctor, the wrong medicine. If you take a look at the poor in another dimension, you will see that whatever they do, be it picking up garbage or buying rice and cooking and selling, raising some chickens for some eggs, they are here to listen. In fact, there's no other road out of poverty except the business road. That's all. You can't sit and pray and get a living from whoever's up there. So the only thing is to do business to generate a surplus.

In other words, the poor—these poor are engaged in business. But they're poor because they're bad at business, they lack the business skills, and also the opportunity to borrow from the regular market to borrow some funds. What we, therefore, ought to do is teach them how to be better at business and make sure there are funds available for them tomorrow. Now, who knows how to teach business? Government officials? No. NGOs [non-governmental organizations]? They have a good heart, but not a business brain. (McFarlane laughs)

So obviously, we must go to the business sector and ask them to participate. And we've been doing this for the last fifteen years. We call it the Thai Business Initiative in Rural Development—T-BIRD, for short—where we go to the business sector and say, “We would like that you participate. Sure. Your major reason is profitability, without doubt, but today that seems to be a common ethos amongst business—and that you could also have more than one bottom line. You've got to be environmentally friendly, erect

morally, erect in your business, and similarly, you can also do something to help bring along those people who lack opportunity.” And that’s the approach I use.

And I said, “Look, given the money, you’ll never have enough money, and it won’t do the job.” So giving them fish—better still than teaching them to fish is teaching them how to breed fish. And so, we said if a company would send two or three staff members to spend two or three weekends in the village, get to know what’s going on, see who’s doing what. And before long, you will find who the best ten are, and divide them into groups of ten and work with a group of ten first. If it’s mostly agriculture, any businessperson will ask the right question: “So have you had your soil tested?” The answer will be, “No.” “Are you using the best seeds possible?” “No idea.” “Using the right fertilizer?” “No idea.” “How’s your harvesting?” “Well, not so good.” “Marketing?” Even worse.

So those are the key elements of business. And so then, you make suggestions on how you can do better, sit down with each of them, do a very simple business plan, and you will probably find on average they need to invest about two hundred and fifty dollars to three hundred dollars more. And then you say, Okay, this is what you do with this.

McFarlane Per person, or—

Viravaidya Per person.

McFarlane Okay.

Viravaidya It’s not much. And then you go to the bank and the bank is very happy to talk to somebody from business. So then you say, “Look, I represent these ten

poor farmers and here's their business plan that I've worked with them. And they each require three hundred dollars. My company will guarantee that loan." The bank will jump at it and then they start going. And then, three months later, you do the next ten, but three from the first ten join you also. So bit by bit, you turn them into better businesspeople.

And so this is what we've been doing. And in so many areas, poverty is just gone. Secondary school enrollment is the highest in the country because they have money to pay for bus fares and books and quality education is free. And helping them in terms of income and also some help beyond that in the areas of improving the quality of life. They help in educational areas, environmental areas, gender equality and democracy in the villages and so on and so on. Companies have the brightest staff, have more money than anybody else—but the issue isn't the money—and they have the skills that the villages need to get out of poverty, and nobody else has that skill. So it's really an incumbent role for the business sector to help. Government can make it more attractive with tax deductabilities and so forth. So this is what we've been working on.

McFarlane How did you—where did this idea come from?

Viravaidya From somewhere—maybe a bacteria inside my body. (McFarlane laughs) I don't know. I just keep on observing things, and common sense mostly. I'm not a much-learned person in terms of degree after degree. I only have honor degrees. I had to have a bachelor's degree after much suffering.

McFarlane (laughs) Will these methods work elsewhere in the world? Are they working?

Viravaidya Absolutely. Wherever you can sell cigarettes, you can sell other goods and

services and make a profit. This can be done. You've got companies that can help villages. And you—take with Boeing. There must be over ten thousand companies making parts for Boeing. Same for Toyota. Well, if you subcontract certain things out, all can be done. And they produce things that we need in urban settings, be it the agricultural side or not. And the other one we've done is asking companies—we've got about fifty now—that have moved their manufacturing base from Bangkok into a rural setting of, say, five hours away from Bangkok.

McFarlane Because labor's cheaper, or—

Viravaidya No, because you destroy the social fabric of the village through migration. When you bring people to machines, they leave their homes, they leave their families, social structure changes, culture and traditions are destroyed. When you get to the city, what money you can send home is very low because the cost is higher in the city. Now, if you take machines to people instead—the very same people, you have—it's a win-win situation, both on the business side and on the people and community's side. They don't have to leave home. They go home each evening like everybody else. No migration.

And what they get in terms of net income is higher than Bangkok. And it goes back to the family, into agriculture and all these areas in rural Thailand where manufacturing has moved out. Yes, the cost of labor is also cheap, but it's a win-win situation and the people don't lose and the company doesn't lose. Before, the company won and the people lost.

McFarlane But the incentives for the company are what?

Viravaidya Very high-quality products, very little turnover, and they make more profit. So

it's not charity. It's smart business, where you have two winners rather than one.

McFarlane Do they pay less in rural areas?

Viravaidya By law they stay, and in many cases they are required to have to pay more because it's piecework. Some of the work is piecework. When the people are happier, they do more work. And some people earn more in rural settings than they do in Bangkok because their output is higher.

McFarlane How do you approach a business?

Viravaidya Well, I go to see them, chat with them. I have my slideshow to show that you're doing well, but would it be better if while doing well, others can also benefit somewhat from you? And even one day, they will become your customers. They might be barefoot today, but they'll wear Nikes tomorrow if they have more money. It just makes sense. I said, "You're making this product but, you may not know it, but you're creating a negative aspect for the rural setting. But why didn't we combine the two? I take you out and show you." The most difficult was getting the first company to go.

McFarlane Which company was it?

Viravaidya Bata was the first company—Bata shoes. So once they went out, others went out and saw them. Either Bata is smart or stupid, they decided. (McFarlane laughs) They weren't stupid, and it showed. And other companies have now followed, making clothing, shoes, toys, and diamonds and so on, in our country. And Nike is one of the companies—well, Nike doesn't produce but the contractors of Nike.

So whenever you have a factory, you also have a village development

program, village developing fund from the company, in this case, Nike. So when you've got a thousand people working in this area, they spend. We know what they spend it on, so we train people to come work in the factory, we lend them the money, and so they set themselves up as shopkeepers and selling all the goods and services that the new factory workers [need]. If we didn't do that, didn't intervene, then the fat cats from town would come out and take all our property. So we now have created another group who were formally very poor, now as small entrepreneur, small businesspeople selling food products, clothing products, and other services, barber shop—all those things that you spend money on. Now, not only do they get a wage as a factory worker, another group are earning income from doing business with them.

McFarlane You've taken on the middle men before—

Viravaidya Yes.

McFarlane No problems?

Viravaidya So far, no problems. Only thirty years.

McFarlane (laughs) I mean, I wondered about that in the description of the refugee camps.

Viravaidya Well, what you do is you look at the middlemen first. You have to understand them and then they understand you. So you see what they do. They do at least nine lines of business. And if you take away one line, you go to them and try to introduce another line for them. In fact, many of them would be very keen to help us, even.

McFarlane Explain that to me.

Viravaidya Well, for instance, there were drug stores in a certain town and they were

selling drugs and we were selling contraceptives, too. They said, Hey, we'll help you sell contraceptives, and anyone who buys contraceptives, we'll let them buy other drugs at a cheaper price. Well, the people have good hearts and maybe approach them the right way. There's no threat, we've never been a threat to anyone. We don't carry any ammunition with us in any form, except just say, "Hey, let's give the little guy a bit of a chance" and, "You're doing well", and, "You continue to do well. You're way ahead, so don't worry about somebody. You find another line. "

McFarlane But you pay attention to—

Viravaidya Oh, yes. Because we know that if you can communicate—just like a doctor before an injection. You would give him an injection or whatever injection. If you know the doctor is going to do it and it's for your benefit, you grimace and you say, that's okay. But if you're standing there and suddenly you get a pinprick in your bottom without being warned who the hell it is, then there's war. I think it's communications.

McFarlane Has T-BIRD worked in other countries?

Viravaidya If they're serious about it, it would work in any country. Indonesia has had six teams every year—

McFarlane Here?

Viravaidya —to learn. They group to the country and they say, "Yep". Seeing is proof - is believing. So they need to talk to the people in the villages. They talk to the companies and they go back and start—the Philippines have started the same thing. It's straightforward.

McFarlane Has this been written up or—

Viravaidya

A part of the Harvard Business School started doing a case study. And this has been quite a long time since they started it. A lot to update. There's a whole lot to update. I mean, I've told other business schools about this privatization of poverty reduction. In fact, I said, "It's no different from you guys coming to get your master's degree, your MBA. You're not coming here to get money from it; you're coming here to get knowledge, hopefully with which to manage better and to earn more, make more money." So that's what the villages need from the company: not money, but skills. And there's so many examples of it.

McFarlane

Can you give me one?

Viravaidya

Oh. Thousands and thousands. Let me give you a couple that are quite different. One is by a car company, Volvo. They know nothing about agriculture, but they took on a village they were in and found out what people were doing and they discovered through mutual consent and understanding that these farmers growing corn weren't making much money. They said, "Well, we don't know what else to do. We only know corn."

So Volvo said, "Well, we'll show you around. You can decide which one makes sense." What made the greatest sense to them was going to municipalities, golf courses, housing estates to see them all buying thousands and thousands of trees. Somebody could grow them. The farmers said, "I think we're just the ones." So they found out the details. Started producing some seedlings. Then when the trees were about six or seven months, they were dug up, surrounded well with fishnet around it—sellout. They used to earn about two dollars a day. Now they earn two hundred dollars a day from

the trees. Now, that was just skill. Volvo didn't know agriculture, but Volvo businesspeople know other businesspeople, so they talked to their friends. That's just one example. Nobody's poor anymore there. Everyone's got more money than they need.

Another one was a company, a joint venture between a Thai and a German glass company. They were making glass in Thailand. One of the things they used in the factory is a swab made of wiring, twisted wire, and the end of it holds a bunch about the size of your fist. Cotton ends that had been thrown away from cotton factories and it's combined together and you put this in a bit of a liquid and you put it into the glass mold to stop the glass from sticking to the steel mold.

So they said, "Look, why do we need to buy this? We'll teach the villagers how to make it." So the village have it, a very simple machine, hand machine that you turn the wiring and then you put the cotton wool on it. The company is using it. And they said, "Well every glass factory in Europe needs it."

Oberland Glass in Germany was a partner with them, so they exported it. And now almost every European glass factory is using it in the business sector and they need arm protection band made of cloth that was made in the villages. Gloves made in the villages, masks made in the villages, brooms now made in the villages to be used in the homes of their 1,600 staff and their friends. So there's now five thousand buying brooms of elderly women who can't get a job anywhere else.

So here's an example. You get—the issue is not money, it's knowledge and knowing what to do. Now we have a village making Thai silk, the same

Thai silk that most people know. I said, “Women in the West don’t buy a piece of Thai silk, take it back, and get the dressmaker to do it. On average, that’s not the case. Why do we make Thai silk into something else?” So now we’re making flags. Thai silk flags, with, you know, the union jack. What do you call your flag?

McFarlane Stars and Stripes.

Viravaidya The Stars and Stripes. So they’re being made, and they’re being given to the prime minister, in fact, two or three days from now, to be given to the APEC [Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation] leaders who are coming to Thailand. So we can make flags, German flags, Swiss flags, and so on and sell to other countries, using Thai silk. No country has its flag in silk yet. And we also—there’s a thick Thai silk that we’re making the Scottish tartans. (McFarlane laughs) It’s the same in Scotland. Now, here are simple examples of business companies, business brain, working with the rural community. It’s just three.

McFarlane So the companies get enthusiastic?

Viravaidya Oh, the staff are delighted to see that their time is extremely useful by giving a whole new life to the people that they come into contact with.

McFarlane How can these methods be exported?

Viravaidya Come and learn from us. I hate going around preaching. (McFarlane laughs) So we’ve had about twenty years of training. Forty-seven countries have come and spent two weeks training for it, sometimes three weeks training for it. And they go back and do it.

And the other one that we push very hard now is NGO sustainability. NGOs cannot survive by begging. Mother’s milk—that’s why we don’t have

mother's milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner when we are teenagers.

(McFarlane laughs) You've got to begin to help yourself. It's unrealistic to expect that we can live off of generosity of other people forever. There's absolutely no way. Even our parents can't help us forever, so how could any wonderful donor do that? So you've got to plan to be self-sufficient financially one time.

Today we have an unlimited demand chasing a limited supply of resources. So we've got to learn. So here for the last—we're thirty years old as a nonprofit, and our first business company started twenty-nine years ago. We now have sixteen separate legal entities paying taxes. And the profits of these companies they use as a donation to the nonprofit. The companies we call, we nicknamed them, business for social progress.

Tape 1, side 1, ends; side 2 begins.

—all of those things in one roof. Here you have all sorts of people sitting there and they'll think, Well, we'll live off donations. They have a brand name, you know, they have a brand. The Red Cross, they will produce soap, toiletries, drugs, you name it, and sell and put their profits into the Red Cross. Imagine how much money they make. I would buy Red Cross products because *a*, I know it would be quality. And *b*, where the profits go. That's just another example of people not maximizing the resources at their fingertips.

And so, NGOs have to do more and more business. We plan to open a Cabbages and Condoms restaurant in America together with Planned Parenthood. They're not afraid of condoms. See look, Planned Parenthood is in so many cities and other countries as well. So if McDonalds can do it—

they're not that much more intelligent than us (McFarlane laughs)—we can do it too.

McFarlane And I hope the food is better.

Viravaidya Oh, the food is fantastic. Our food is excellent. It's guaranteed not to cause pregnancy. (McFarlane laughs)

McFarlane What advice do you have for people who work with refugees or will work with them in the future?

Viravaidya Well, first, they are people like you, and they're not pigs. When I say that, I want to explain it this way. Some people say if you give them food and a clean living condition and a lavatory, the same you did for a pig, then you're off target. You've got to see the refugee camp as a town, as a village, as a city. They need to have all sorts of social activities. Let them do things that are interesting and fun.

In our case, in a refugee camp, we had them growing rice out of pots. They had vegetables growing all over the place when others said it couldn't be done. But I've never worked with refugees before, so, you know, I don't have an impression. They're just ordinary people like us, so let's make it interesting. So they grew vegetables all over the place, climbing vegetables on top of their thatched roofs, and, you know, the rat program, rat-catching program (McFarlane laughs) and fly-catching program got the kids involved and getting family planning involved. Just treat them as anybody else and they are only temporary as a refugee. That's the way we look at it. And we just regard them as friends who need a bit more help and personal attention rather than just feeding.

McFarlane Has the poverty alleviation that you've been involved in changed the role of women?

Viravaidya Women are changing, but it's the men who need to change more. Just this morning, this very day—you will probably see it tomorrow morning in the papers—I have a television program that at the next election of senators, which is three years from today—because the men, or those who are senators, cannot run again for another six years. We'll either be dead or we're stupid enough to run again—okay, you wait. (McFarlane laughs) And I propose that we change the constitution so that at the next election, half the members must be women. And the easiest way is that every person has two votes. A woman of your choice and a man of your choice. And then you have, you know, first past the post in any city; Bangkok has eighteen, so nine will be women. So I, as a man, would vote for a woman of my choice and a man of my choice.

Then if we do that, Thailand will begin to improve immensely. There are a lot of capable women, but our society, our men in particular, are somewhat retarded in its knowledge and its realization. The women have so much to contribute to society. I teach young kids, I say, "Walk nine steps on one foot and then the other one step with two feet." I say, "Which one's better?" "Two feet." I say, "Well, take a look at our parliament. We have 90 percent men, 10 percent women. It's the same as you. Isn't that silly? We have two tractors and we plow the field with one. We have two refrigerators and we only use one. Why don't we use both?"

And I get them to also use the hand that they are most at ease with, say, right-handed, use that—tie your left hand up and see how far you go just

using your hand, one hand alone. And that isn't even the hand you use. And all of the sudden, they say, My gosh, I need both hands. And I say, "Imagine what it's like to use the other hand, only left-handed, if you're right-handed." Instead of saying, "Oh, it's a pity, it's not just." I just say, "It's damn stupid." (McFarlane laughs) That brings the point home more easily.

So we have to educate the kids in school and especially we have three more years, we do it in high school. They'll all be voters of the future and go to families, and go to schools and say, "Aren't we stupid? We have two tractors. We only use one."

McFarlane How was your proposal for parliament—

Viravaidya Well, it'll be a constitutional amendment.

McFarlane So—

Viravaidya Well, you put it—get a group of people, fifty thousand, write in the proposed amendment. And if it goes through parliament, then we can change the constitution.

McFarlane What do you think the prospects are?

Viravaidya Well, it's certainly much better than the lower house because there's no vested interest. I, as a man, can't run again. I can't protect myself, so vested interest is low. I said, "Get your wife and your daughter to run." (McFarlane laughs) I didn't mind, as long as it's a woman. So they can still have a family. Might even be better if another man competed with him. The family may not be in politics anymore but if it's your wife or your daughter, fine. It might get there. You never know. But just because it might not get there has never stopped me from doing anything. Sometimes you have to climb the mountain three times.

McFarlane What do you mean by training children—that you’re working with training children?

Viravaidya Well, we have scholarships, we have programs in schools, on environmental education, equality, and so on. We get the kids to understand. We even have games of snakes and ladders. And let’s say it’s a program on family planning, anything that’s anti-family planning, you’re penalized. Come back to ladder number three. Want to have lots of kids? Come back, you don’t even know your future. Mother takes a pill every night, a wonderful mother. Move ahead five. Uncle buys condom. Move ahead seven. Uncle gets drunk, doesn’t use condom. (McFarlane laughs) Come back thirty. All those things.

We did the same on equality, on AIDS, the whole works, and came up with a new health bit, sort of *A* is for, I don’t know, still apple, is it today? (McFarlane laughs) Amazing. So we can have *B* for birth, *C* for condom, *I* for IUD, *V* for vasectomy, and all sorts of things. You can have games, you can even have safe-sex dart boards. (laughs) You will have to throw the dart, you land on unsafe, you land on different sorts of diseases, you get a condom. You land on safe, you get a t-shirt. So it’s using, sort of, education and entertainment combined. Life is dull enough and yet dull instruction, too, puts you to sleep.

McFarlane What I’m thinking is, I come from a country where if you tried this in the schools, the religious fundamentalists would—

Viravaidya Well, that’s your bad luck.

McFarlane You don’t run into that here?

Viravaidya No. Well, we go around and, of course, nothing sees you but you have to keep

at it. You look at it and find out what's the best approach. And we used humor and we tell today's parents—this, in fact, as much as today. This was about ten years ago on AIDS. We said, You have two choices. As you children get older, you will come to a fork in the road. Both forks lead to flowers at one time. You can choose. One is the graduation of your child around twenty-three, twenty-four—flowers at the graduation. Or, the other one, flowers at the funeral of your child. If you want your child to be ignorant, then get ready the second type of flower, because he or she is going to die from AIDS. And if you're wise, you'll teach them about HIV/AIDS, correct understanding, and sex: then it will be flowers at the graduation. You decide. All of them say, We want the first set of flowers, not the second set.

McFarlane So you've really confronted sexual mores in this society.

Viravaidya Um-hm.

McFarlane Do you have any generalizations for people in the future or another—

Viravaidya Whatever you do, you've got to try and prove to them what you're doing is correct and sincere. I think those two—correct and sincere. We did studies into the Buddhist scriptures, and Buddhism's support of family planning was a quotation: "birth causes suffering." So if you can prevent birth, you can also prevent suffering.

McFarlane (laughs) Kind of sad.

Viravaidya Can't say that's for the Catholic Church so much.

McFarlane Turn it on as a—

Viravaidya It's sad to be interpreted. (McFarlane laughs) Judges do that all the time.

McFarlane My reading of the D'Agnes book on your life thus far is that you're something

of an organizational genius. Those are my words. Can you give me some principles or methods of operating an organization?

Viravaidya

Well, you start off with little money and against the trend and it's harder. But if you're starting out with pots of money, with the trend, then it's not so difficult. We started with two thousand dollars, going against the trend, trying to introduce family planning where people have fewer children when we have national awards every year for Mothers of the Year, the ones with the largest number of children. We've got, you know, sashes and awards and stars, you know, medal of honor and all that.

McFarlane

This is from the government?

Viravaidya

Yes, it's from the government. And at weddings, they used to say, May you fill your house—a toast—May you fill your house with children and your town with grandchildren. That's what we are up against.

And so, we just quietly went about it. And in the end, I said, "Let's take it head on." And the only thing that would open eyes of society or maybe shock them, even, was the condom. That did the trick. When I bring out an IUD or a packet of pills, you don't even raise an eyebrow. It's just a packet of pills. But a condom—whoa. If you were embarrassed by it and I started to say, "Hey, the condom is a very friendly product." The condom is clean if your mind isn't dirty. It can be used as a balloon (McFarlane laughs), you know, tourniquet for snake bites and deep cuts. You can use it for Coca-Cola. You can use it as a lubricator or as shave lotion, blah, blah, blah. And nowadays, you can use a condom to put your mobile telephone in during the rainy season. (McFarlane laughs) That's the latest.

But again, so we just kept at it, at it, at it, and people either—personally, you're either mad or you're on to something. In the end, they saw we saw we weren't mad because we just kept at it. Never insulted anyone. And we had some, what I call diamond-fingered ladies, who felt that they ran society. They would criticize me and I would go to them. I would go, Look, I'm just a young man. I'm just thirty, so don't expect me to be too smart. And I'm doing this. I am trying to get my point across. You're wiser. You could advise me what to do.

And they would advise me, and I would continue to do exactly the same thing. But now that I've gone to them, they never criticize me anymore. So it's a matter of touching base with those who are cousins of God. (McFarlane laughs) And then they let you go. It's a matter of realizing, Ah, I have come and bowed before them. They're still the supreme, up there in the mountain tops, and they'll let me alone. Just keep it up. And we believed we were doing the right thing. We believed we were honest.

And you can't cheat a whole country so now the whole country believes us. In fact, what we're teaching is providing an element of human right, the right for you to choose the number of children you want. There was no compulsory element in our work at all. A wide variety of contraceptives for you to choose.

McFarlane Do you think that's important?

Viravaidya Yes. And correct information and available right at your doorstep. That's how—where cabbages and condoms came about, that if family planning was to work, then contraceptives need to be as easily found as vegetables in the

villages.

McFarlane

Within the organizations you've been involved in, though.

Viravaidya

Well, sure. You've got to think of people. You can't work on your own. You'd go crazy if you were living alone. So you're—even when you're living, you're living with somebody else. When you're having fun, even laughter, you need another person here, except when you're in front of television. (McFarlane laughs) So it's always teamwork that's important. And people are different. And how can you get to them? How can you get them to wish to spend time with you and work? And so, you've got to show them that you're thinking of them, thinking of a target down the road, thinking of how to do it, showing them the way.

And you can work as hard as they do, or you can work harder. You've got to come earlier than they come—each little thing, bit by bit, and then you can come later, later on. And let them see you're serious about it. You're not just going to use them. They are part of the team and you are part of their team. And look for alternatives. There are always several ways to skin a cat.

I use what's called a—I guess it's sort of a philosophy of water. You're flowing. If someone puts a dam in front of you, try and get over it. If you can't get over it, try to seep under it. If you can't do that either, evaporate and come down as rain on the other side. In other words, don't give up and look at, you know, several ways—new ways of doing it. And don't give up too easily.

It's not a matter of being, as you said in a very flattering way, a genius. It's just, sort of, because one feels so inadequate because I don't have all these

crazy degrees and MBAs and so on, and, you know, God's cousin. So I had to learn how to do it. And the more you realize you need to learn, the more you study it, the more you look it, the more thorough you are. So you can be overeducated and then you make so many mistakes. And sometimes, you end up using the roadmap of London around Bangkok. (McFarlane laughs) You have a roadmap and you get lost. Simple. Walk around, see people doing good.

McFarlane

Where do you get this from? Is this from your upbringing?

Viravaidya

I got it from my mother in terms of doing public good. [She would] say, "What a waste to them to spend their money on our education, mine included, and for me to just go and sell some beer and get lots of money and don't pay it off, what a waste of a lifetime. You should do something with your life, especially if you're reasonably comfortable and there are lots of people that don't even have the comforts that your dog had, then you'd better start doing something to make their life better. Then, it's been a worthwhile life. Otherwise, you might as well have been a stone."

McFarlane

So she gave you those values?

Viravaidya

Yeah, yeah. And then, how to get—to have new angles, new approaches, probably because I have been sent away from home early. While I was in Thailand, my father and mother sent me, every month I went for a weekend [to] my aunt, just to see how they live. It's a different house, so I've got to learn how to adjust.

And so I learned how to realize that I am not the norm all the time. I am a deviant at certain times and I have to learn the new norm. So I went to

boarding school before I went to Australia to learn because they were going to send me there. So when I went to boarding school, I was never homesick because I learned. And during holiday times, friends would ask me to stay and I had to learn to fit in because I wanted to be comfortable with them. So they'd do washing up, I'd do washing up, and do everything else that they do—learn their manners. My mother taught me whatever she could. And she would back me up every time. She would write a letter to thank the mother of the boy who took me home. So I always had good backup in terms of this and learning.

I've learned to live in, I guess, in different lands, so to speak, in different cultures and different religions. Jewish family, Parsi family, Protestant family, Church of England family, Thai, Buddhist family. So religion was a matter of respecting whatever religion. So I was comfortable with other societies and other types of people. So these are the things I learned, therefore, to be with.

In the organization, you're the deviant, you're not the norm. You might be the boss or the chairman, but you've got to learn their new culture and then make some adjustments as you go along. And, again, be honest and to do what you believe and for them to believe. That is—it's for the good of society, as a whole—all the organizations. So if you know too much, then you don't communicate too well. I am a person who knows too little, so I always learn.

McFarlane So you'd maintain a sense of humility.

Viravaidya You have to, otherwise you'd go crazy. And humor always helps.

McFarlane Where did that come from?

Viravaidya Australia, I think. (laughter) They don't have a culture, so they have laughter.

(laughter)

McFarlane What do you have to say to people working in population or family planning in the future?

Viravaidya Oh, well, I say today, “I’m a little bit surprised; I’m a little bit upset with you, displeased with you, because you don’t have the guts to come out and say, ‘I work in family planning. I believe in it as a human right.’ So as certain countries and certain organizations try to bully you and you sit quietly and know that two hundred women a day are dying from illegal or unsafe abortions, you know that women in poor countries die by the thousands and tens and tens and tens of thousands, yet you’re not doing very much about it.

“So come out and be brave, and really catch the bull by the horn and do the things that need to be done. Say the word ‘condom.’ Make it available. Talk about it. Just because the church doesn’t agree, there’s an ultra-rightist, so what? That can be their belief. You have to put up a fight. Don’t go home whimpering. Put up a fight. And if it’s an honest fight, a fight for the goodness, for the basic human right, you will win.”

At the moment, they’re so quiet, they go to meetings, they go back and put it in drawers. Little advances have been made in this area. Some area, yes, but some area, no.

McFarlane Can you elaborate?

Viravaidya Well, you take a look at the—we’ve talked at the international conferences on population development about trying to save women’s lives from these abortions. Illegal, unsafe, undoctored. I’ve watched them, said, “Very little has been done.” We have seen four countries in the world make some advances in

their legal aspect and two backwards.

McFarlane Which ones—

Viravaidya Out of a hundred and ninety-eight countries in the world, we have seen four countries that have gone backwards. Sorry, four have gone forward—there's been two that have gone backwards.

McFarlane Who? Which ones?

Viravaidya I don't remember all, but one is Hungary. It's gone backwards in this law. Ask the government about the other country.

McFarlane I'll call them.

Viravaidya And four have moved ahead. But we're not making contraceptives as available as it ought to be. We're certainly not making information—and you know, teenagers, they need to understand sex because nature has made them interested in sex, not that they're bad. You know, nature has made it. And so, we've got to be realistic and teach kids about sex at a younger age than we've been doing. And don't think they're ignorant. They know a lot more than you think.

McFarlane When should we start?

Viravaidya Oh, I think about six or seven. Six, seven, eight would be a good time to start.

McFarlane Because they're starting to get interested?

Viravaidya Oh yeah. I remember when I was seven, seven and a half—I think it's in the book—I climbed up a tree to see one of the maids in the house having a bath. (McFarlane laughs) It certainly wasn't because I wanted to see what dress she wearing (McFarlane laughs) or what sort of soap she was using. Something in my mind said I wanted to have a look at that naked body. And she saw me

before I saw—before I could do anything. And the whole house screamed (McFarlane laughs) and when my father came home, they reported it to him and I was hauled into the consulting room where I normally get some caning when I'm wrong.

And he said, “Did you do this?” I was caught red-handed. I said, “Yes.” He said, “Why?” And my answer was, “I wanted to see.” (McFarlane laughs) So he pulled *Gray's Anatomy* out—both my parents are doctors—and said, “Look, this is what you are looking at. This is what it looks like. And this is what it looks like from the outside and on the inside. And here's more on it. I'll show you more than what you would have seen.” And he spent an hour with me. What it is, why, how it changes shapes over time, and then he put it back and said, “You know where it is. Next time you want to have a look, don't climb, because you might fall down from the tree. Come to this book. And if it's not enough, come to me. I'll try to find you more books.”

I felt cleansed. I thought I wasn't evil but by the noise in the house—and I took that as judgment, Oh, I was evil. But after my father spent time with me, I didn't feel I was evil. I was just inquisitive. I just went to the wrong place and did it the wrong way.

McFarlane

That's remarkable, isn't it?

Viravaidya

That was good. I use that as an example a lot. And I ask kids in school—they are eight, nine, ten, twelve—in many countries I find myself in, [I say], “Okay, I want to talk about sex. Raise your hand if you've heard of the word ‘sex’.” Some do, and I say, “You've never heard of the word ‘sex’? You just heard it from me now. Put your hand up.” And they have a

good laugh and I say, “I’m going to ask you a question about sex and there are three answers: good, bad, unsure.” I say, “All right. Put your hands up if all you think that sex is bad.” Some [raise a hand]. “Put up your hands if you think sex is good.” And nobody puts it up except me. “And then if you’re not sure.” Most of them put it up.

I say, “Look, you know why I said sex is good? It’s fantastic, it’s great, it’s the most fantastic thing.” They look at me. (McFarlane laughs) And I say, “Do you know why? Because a man and a woman had sex. One was my father, one was my mother. That’s why I was born. Imagine the—it’d be a terrible world if I wasn’t born. All the fun that I have is because I was born. So thank goodness because of sex. Now you understand? If you agree, then put your hands up.” Everyone raises their hands up. I say, “Now, go home and thank mother and father. Say, ‘Thank you very much for creating me.’”

And then I say, “Look, let’s have a look. Why do we have sex?” et cetera, et cetera. I explain and then I say, “There are five types of animals. You guess which one has more sex: elephant, gorilla, horse, chicken, and then a very small animal called a honey possum from Australia.” (McFarlane laughs) I say, “Say which one has more sex.” Some think elephants, some gorillas. I say, “Elephant, once every four years. Gorilla, once every two years. You know why? We’ll get to that in a minute.

“And then the horse and then the chicken and then the rabbit and then the”—I said rabbit very often. “You know why? Because they get eaten. (McFarlane laughs) So they have to reproduce, just like a factory. The honey possum is the most delicious piece of meat (laughs) for certain types of

animals. They get eaten faster than rabbits. They are very slow runners, but they are delicious. So they have to have sex all the time just to keep up the family members. (McFarlane laughs) To raise the family members eaten by somebody else. (McFarlane laughs) And the why not the gorilla and the elephant? Because there's no danger. Nobody eats them. That's why they don't have to breed so much. Not because these are sexy and these are clean minded. It has nothing to do with clean and dirty mind. It's nature. All right?"

And they went home and told their parents. Well, I got telephone calls saying, "Can I come listen, too?" There was not one that, Oh, well, you know, we think it's not so good. Because again, it's the way you teach it, bit by bit. And I let them see the positive angle of it rather than negative.

McFarlane

And that goes to their parents—

Viravaidya

And the parents love it. And so, whenever we have sex education groups in school, we get teachers, parents, and students to sit together, separately first. Each group says, What should be taught? And then two groups—teacher and parents. And then teachers and kids, and then kids and parents, so they narrow or broaden their area of what is agreeable. Public agreement, then they don't worry about what's being taught because it's all within these things that they've seen.

McFarlane

Do you get parents who won't participate?

Viravaidya

Not so far. Everyone's been quite relaxed. Well, I'm known to them and it's fun to meet me, sort of thing, you know. They go home and say, I got his autograph, and all that jazz. (laughs) So my background as a bit of a celebrity on television helps while on this.

McFarlane Which started early, right?

Viravaidya Yeah. Way, way back, yeah.

McFarlane What do you consider, thus far, has been your most difficult work?

Viravaidya Nothing is easy, nothing is insuperable. So there are certain things I have to wait and put on the back burner because we don't have the resources to do. Probably the most difficult is getting as much money as I would like for the organization to do more public good. They can't sit there and (snaps fingers) create money. It takes time to earn money or to find money for the organization. That's probably the most difficult.

McFarlane Do you not like that kind of work?

Viravaidya Oh, I do it. I like it. I have to do it. But it's hard to get the money. Putting in the hours is not a problem. It's getting the money. But that's probably the hardest work I know. I—the organization, my colleagues and I have far more time, technical skill, ability to do, than we have money. If we had more money, we could do so much more public good.

McFarlane What else would you do?

Viravaidya Oh, the issue of women running the country more, education, justice, making sure every man who beats a woman, sort of, uses a baseball bat on his own left or right hand. A lot of things that need to be changed. And it takes time. You've got to start with young children. Corruption, we do some corruption work, anti-corruption work with youth. We have a youth anti-corruption forum where they learn about corruption because they're going to be adults. They're going to be leaders in the village. We've got to teach them corruption, what's going on, when they're young.

McFarlane How do you do that? I mean what—

Viravaidya Oh, we give examples of how—what corruption is, and they even study whether there's any corruption in their own school.

McFarlane Wow. That sounds like it could be explosive.

Viravaidya No, it's necessary. If kids understand corruption—because a lot of them step into it without knowing that it is corruption and what is conflict of interest. Start young, just like sex education. Everything has to start young. We want—you know, I want gender equality where women really do those things that they can really contribute to society. We're not using them. We're not allowing—allowing is the wrong word—we're not smart enough, as a male society, to invite the women and say, Boy, if you help us, our boat is going to go twice the speed. Plenty to do.

McFarlane So far, what do you consider to be your most rewarding work?

Viravaidya All of it's rewarding. Anything that doesn't fail. People say, Oh, do you feel proud of this? I say, "I never have that word in my vocabulary." It's not a matter of being proud. It's a matter of being pleased, relieved, delighted that it didn't fail, that it worked and that people are happy and get a better life out of it, makes me happy. A million dollars in my heart. It's not a matter of pride or being proud of. I just like it.

McFarlane And that's what has kept you going?

Viravaidya Yeah. I enjoy it. I enjoy this work. Some people say, Oh, you sacrifice. It's no sacrifice. I'm thoroughly selfish. I do it because I enjoy it just like the gamblers. (McFarlane laughs) I enjoy this work. That's why I do it. Because—I enjoy it because it's fun and it makes people have a better life. I'm not

religious about it. I just said, Hey, what a waste of life to earn pots of money, drink white wine, eat (unclear) and pass it out the next day.

McFarlane

Is there anything else you'd like to add to your view on population?

Viravaidya

I think, generally, people—most people from more economically developed societies have a tendency or difficulty to think that people in the poorer world aren't as smart as they are or can't do as many things as they can. They tend to think, because economically we're not as well-off, therefore we're not as well-off in every other element, including intellect. And it's sad.

They've got to learn that people are the same wherever they are. They might not be rich, but wealth is not the only thing in life. It's just like when you go to a rural setting. Don't think they're stupid. They're not stupid people. A lot of social capital and the skill that exists in their culture and their traditions. Sit and learn. Everyone has something to give. Everyone has something that is more knowledgeable than you. Somebody is always more.

And it's a, sort of, basically respect and acceptance of other people. Not tolerant. Tolerant is—they say Thai people are tolerant. I say that's a rather condescending term. Thai people are very accepting of things that are different—race, religion—you see the world more as a fruit salad.

McFarlane

Why?

Viravaidya

Well, the world has many religions, has many colors of skin. And when you say one skin is better than the other, you're crazy. Fruit salad is the best one where everyone joins in, where everyone's accepted.

McFarlane

Why is—why would you say Thailand is especially tolerant?

Viravaidya

Well, probably we—this is the eighth wonder of the world. We do have a lot

of—

Tape 1 ends; tape 2, side 1 begins.

—ability to accept things that are different, see them as your equal. This is not happening in (unclear), no. Malaysia, no. Indonesia, no. You've got race, you've got religion, there is killing. But here, anyone can reach higher. It doesn't matter where you come from. Thai is not in the blood. It's not in the color of your hair or your skin. Thai is in the heart. And this is probably the greatest asset we have in this country. That's why we're very good at the service industry because we don't look down on people.

McFarlane Hmm. Where did this come from?

Viravaidya Oh, probably a mixture of pleasant life, partly Buddhism, but partly an example of the king from—for hundreds of years, we invited other people in to be our—as advisors to the sovereigns—our prime minister, we hired them. Anyone who was good, we hired you to do it. But if you didn't perform, we'd chop your head off, and you can't resign and all that (McFarlane laughs) or get re-elected. Even in the early days of Bangkok, we had people from different countries running our ports, running our trams, even our policemen. We hired the English to do it. We weren't colonized. We've never been colonized. So that's another one.

McFarlane So they were hired.

Viravaidya So we've never been colonized, and so we hired them. And so we always accepted people from different parts of the world. We had Japanese palace guards over three hundred, almost four hundred years ago. The secondary Samurai, you know, the ones that don't make the major league (McFarlane

laughs), and they came to Thailand. They were much better than us, so they were the palace guards. And we had a Portuguese person that had a Japanese wife. He became prime minister. And his wife was Japanese, but she was Christian—had a tough time in Japan, but was well accepted here. So when he was beheaded for failing as prime minister, they kept her on teaching cooking in the royal kitchen. So a lot of our sweets are based on Portuguese sweets through a Japanese lady (McFarlane laughs) whose husband was beheaded. (laughs)

McFarlane Does that mean you are not as optimistic about these programs working in other parts of the world?

Viravaidya Oh, yes, I am. The other—the programs have—can be implemented. I'm just saying that this is just a man in the street's attitude towards other people and the equality. And in 1860 until—not 1960—1862, Thailand offered foreign assistance to America. All recorded in the Library of Congress letters written by our king offering an elephant as a gift to America, said, you know, as beast of burden and so on and so forth. The real reason we could give foreign assistance is the same reason that you give foreign assistance, because we need America's help. Thailand was surrounded one side by the French and the other side by the British. We needed somebody with a proven record from the so-called hall of fame who had kicked out the French—kicked out the British and kept the French at bay, (McFarlane laughs) America. We said, Hey, we need you as our consultant and new advisor, so we'll give you some foreign assistance because we (laughs) want your skill to keep out the French and the British.

And the letter was sent during the time of President Buchanan, but without DSL [digital subscriber line] it arrived rather late and the reply came from President Lincoln, thanking his majesty for “your kind offer” and so on. “But now, the elephant would find it very hard and cold in the forests of America, and when we need to use transportation, we have steam engine.” In a sense, very politely, he was saying, “You are kind, but you have offered something we don’t need.”

And America has been doing that to us ever since. (laughs) So it’s an interesting history. You see, we—and he was the first Asian statesman by eighty, ninety years. But King Rama IV, that was portrayed in *The King and I*. And the film is still around with Yul Brynner. It’s a very, very entertaining film. But a great character—very knowledgeable. He learned many, many—he was a monk for twenty-six years before becoming king. So he learned languages. He was a very good astrologer. And he was the one who brought Anna [Leonowens] to Thailand to teach English to children.

McFarlane Now, Thailand doesn’t get any U.S. population assistance?

Viravaidya No, we don’t need anyone’s assistance. We haven’t had it for twenty years.

McFarlane So—

Viravaidya We did in the early days. UN and some International Planned Parenthood Federation. America was instrumental in the early days in helping us.

McFarlane Yeah. Allan Rosenfield actually—

Viravaidya Ah, yeah. He was—

McFarlane —responded to me email about coming here.

Viravaidya Oh, yeah. And America—and Allan played a very important role here. But he

was Population Council—private. But USAID [United States Agency International Development] was instrumental in helping early days in Thailand population programs.

McFarlane What did they do?

Viravaidya Well, they gave us contraceptives and some money for trading of our doctors abroad so that we'd come back more skilled. I would say that's an everlasting gift from America that's never rotted away like the tanks and guns that they gave to our Thai military. The benefits of American assistance—oh, they're probably worth the equivalent of five tanks—are still evident today.

McFarlane Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Viravaidya Well, just make family planning more interesting. Make it more fun. Get young people involved and they'll understand it's got something to do with sex. Don't escape it, don't deny it, but make it palatable just like when you eat soup. Make it very, very hot chili or just slightly chili with pepper, that's all. At different times you need a different intensity, and make it as integrated as possible.

When you want to have non-pregnancy, agricultural credit, you borrow money—low interest rate if you're not pregnant. We had a family planning pig raising program. (McFarlane laughs) If you're not pregnant for one year, you get two pigs to raise at a time. Not pregnant for two years, you get four pigs, and then six pigs to raise at a time—on credit.

So it tells them, when you're not pregnant, you make money. Ah, that's not a bad way to space pregnancy. You space pregnancy and you earn more money that way. So introduce new things because, you see, it's a Western

perception and a somewhat unusual, as an abstraction. You take a pill or whatever and the final result is zero—no pregnancy. Everything they do is not an abstraction, it's a reality. You dig a hole, you see a hole. You get an apple—you get a banana, you get a banana. But here, you take something and the result, the success, is nothingness. So by saying, Well, if you don't get pregnant, you make more money, then they begin to see it's a real event, not an abstraction.

McFarlane Yeah, not just a vague concept.

Viravaidya And they like it. Yeah, you know, by not being pregnant, I make money. That's pretty good. So many women say, I'd rather raise pigs, (laughter) because they have enough children already. So these—you know, you can integrate many things in with family planning. Micro-credit programs, rewards. We have a non-pregnancy status bonus. Every female, whether seventy years old or two years old—for every month that she's not pregnant—she can't be—five dollars is put into a pot.

McFarlane And where is this?

Viravaidya In Thailand, in our early days.

McFarlane Oh, right.

Viravaidya Micro-credit fund.

McFarlane Oh, okay.

Viravaidya Generated by the non-pregnancy status of the women. So in other words, a woman who is not pregnant or cannot be pregnant puts in sixty dollars' worth—we do it on her behalf—into the micro-credit fund, and it's used to lend. So every woman—Dan Rather says, “Ah, ha, I contributed sixty dollars a

year into this fund,” you know. And the young two-year-old kid, when she grows up, says, “I did the same thing.” So no one’s alienated. So we can use it as a reward—community reward—many others. So family planning can be done in a fun way, but don’t be a coward about it. Go ahead and do it. It’s good. It’s necessary. It’s a human right.

McFarlane Did you start out there?

Viravaidya Sorry?

McFarlane Did you start out there—thinking it was a human right?

Viravaidya Oh, I just—it was just something so necessary. And as it turned out, I saw it as a human right also because we gave family planning service no permanent method, just temporary method, at the refugee camps. And a couple of friends—people came up to us and said, It’s genocide. I said, “What the hell are you talking about? How many children does your mother have?” So and so. (McFarlane laughs) I said, “Well, it’s the same thing. We are just giving her the right that your mother was given by your bloody friend the government. So why do you say it’s genocide? Go home.” So I have to attack them back.

McFarlane Like that?

Viravaidya Oh, yeah. Because we believe we’re doing it. We’re giving exactly the same as we do to the Thai women. We’re not giving dog quality to them and super quality to Thai women. It’s exactly the same thing. The right—and in fact, if they’d studied a bit more—I think they’d rather be stopped and as probably unemployed in England. (McFarlane laughs) If they’d studied a bit more, they would have known there’s a lot of these women have not had a period for about four years because they were so weak. And imagine if they got pregnant

just as long—just as they begin it, just to get healthy. What a risk it would be to the woman also because they didn't understand those elements of maternal/child health, let alone anything else. And if you're doing the right thing, fight for it. And that's just part of our regular philosophy here.

McFarlane And you've been blessed with—or continue to have a real continuity of people here.

Viravaidya Yes, of course. They say, If you're going to fire me, I'm not going to go. (laughter) I'll be here for life. They like it and many of them started their first job out of the university and they're still here.

McFarlane That's remarkable, isn't it?

Viravaidya Yes.

McFarlane An organization.

Viravaidya Yeah.

McFarlane How can that be replicated?

Viravaidya Well, I guess, come and take the—work with them, expand a bit here, and let them see that they are important to the organization. And they can't be people driven by money, so—if you're driven by money, you don't make it here. So they've got to have an interest in the basic human and to get the program going and not in any way avaricious.

McFarlane Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of lessons?

Viravaidya (laughs) I don't see myself as a teacher. No, I don't think so at this stage. Maybe next time—might have a question.

McFarlane Thank you very much.

Viravaidya Okay. (pause in tape)

[Viravaidya and McFarlane have been speaking of Reimert Ravenholt—ed.]
—wasn't shy of the condom, he knew what he was doing. The world has a good laugh about condoms or has good use—if we had a helicopter, he'd throw them out of helicopters sometimes. He was great. He was well appreciated by a lot of people. Of course, he was very senior, too. That helped. And in those days, family planning was, sort of, understood in its right perspective.

McFarlane What do you mean?

Viravaidya Well, it was necessary. We needed women, and families needed to space children. Women didn't have a right to when they could get pregnant. Men have to be educated at the same time. And let's get to work. Public education. And get services up. You can't just talk. Talking doesn't stop pregnancy. You've got to get contraceptives out and the services out. And he supported that very strongly.

McFarlane Yeah, he's—he's emerged as probably the central savior in our (laughs)—

Viravaidya Yeah, he's good.

McFarlane —in our interviews. And he—he was interviewed eleven hours in one day. I didn't do it. (laughs)

Viravaidya Oh. He's got this deep voice.

McFarlane Yeah, I really would liked to have done that. I wasn't able to.

Viravaidya Malcolm Potts is another very fascinating guy.

McFarlane That's been done and I—she also did him.

Viravaidya Yeah, Malcolm was great, but he's so, so articulate—very bright, very, very knowledgeable.

McFarlane Is there anybody else that—(pause in tape)

Viravaidya —and I said, “Hey, you’ve got to not just have lectures.” And I had slides and then I sat down and sold them t-shirts and condoms, keyrings, flags of many countries. And sometimes we say, In case of emergency, break glass and don’t leave home without it.

McFarlane Do people—what do people think of it?

Viravaidya Oh, they bought it like crazy. (McFarlane laughs) So imagine when a t-shirt and a keyring comes out, “In Rubber We Trust”—that will be popular, too, I know.

McFarlane Well, I may become your agent.

Viravaidya (laughter) Good. (pause in tape)

—as we try to make family planning interesting and let them see a reward from practicing family planning, not just a state of non-pregnancy. And our first reward program, as proposed by the villagers, was a stud pig mating service. (McFarlane laughs) We had a—one of our staff had a very, very handsome, strong, big stud, and people said, Look, we would like to have some young piglets from that father. (McFarlane laughs) So we introduced our family planning pig—stud pig program, whereby we would make—bring a stud pig to your place, too. So no consultation cost. We would mate our stud pig with your female. And if you didn’t practice family planning, you’d pay back in one piglet when the baby is born. And if you practiced family planning, then you don’t have to give us back your piglet. It was very popular and the pig enjoyed his work obviously. (McFarlane laughs) He’d hop on the little van and go along very happily. This is around 1976.

McFarlane (laughs) That's wonderful. And so, everybody knew about it.

Viravaidya Oh, they talked about it and had big banners out: "Stud Pig Service."

(laughter) So we just blended family planning with anything that made sense to the villagers.

McFarlane That was their idea.

Viravaidya That's his. A lot of the stuff we do—or we did—we learned from the people. And that's why you learn so much from, supposedly the people we're trying to help. That's why one lesson a lot of people in the West ought to learn is that you can always learn something from somebody, even if that person doesn't have as much money as you. He has as much or even more civilization than you, perhaps. Now, that's a good place to end. (laughs)

end of interview