

Meet Phakphum Inpaen, a Fair Trade Jasmine Rice Farmer



“Jasmine rice is the very heart of the Isaan farmer,”

Phakphum Inpaen passionately explains. Phakphum, a thirty-seven year old Thai rice farmer from the country’s northeast region, has been working on his family’s field since he was 7 years old, dropping out of school to help his single mother with these duties at age 13. He remembers seeing his mother struggle to provide for the family as a child and witnessing the transformative effects of Fair Trade on his farm, his family, and his village.

In the past, when he used conventional rice farming practices Phakphum Inpaen annually applied thirty-six bags of fertilizer to his 11.86 acres of land at a cost of \$328. He also sprayed herbicides and pesticides once a week, needed increased amounts of petroleum to plow the soil hardened by continual chemical application, and was required by the government center where he sold his crop to buy approximately \$37 worth of rice seeds each year. After harvest, Phakphum stored a portion of his rice for family consumption and sold the rest receiving \$1,100. This \$735 of profit was quickly spent on health care, food, transportation, and additional farming inputs such as hiring workers to help harvest or transplant. As he explains:

“We are really in debt from our old practices.”

Now Phakphum no longer worries about losing his ancestor’s land because he, his sister Sohm Rien, and his mother Coe-eye represent one of the 7,500 families currently selling organic Fair Trade rice through a farmer cooperative.

The Fair Trade price has allowed Phakphum to make the three-year transition to organic farming. Subsequently, his pesticide-related respiratory illness has subsided and the health of his fields has improved. Phakphum has not only been able to pay off the debts he incurred under conventional trade, but also has recently bought more land and buffaloes.

Although Phakphum has only been a member of the Fair Trade network for four years, he is the leader of his village’s committee through which farmers annually set the rice price and enforce organic standards. This cooperative structure also gives Phakphum and his neighbors yearly dividends and a community savings fund.

Most important to Phakphum has been the return of his dignity. As he looks out over a golden rice field he states simply,

“I like to be self-reliant. Rely on my two hands and my head. It’s safe for my life and other people’s lives.”

Written by Ellen Roggemann