

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 8 April 2022

---

## Can OTOP Support Northeastern Thailand's Post-Pandemic Recovery?

*Alexandra Dalferro\**



*An extensive array of local products, including traditional handicrafts, cotton and silk garments, pottery, fashion accessories, household items, and food, are included in OTOP - One Tambon (Sub-District), One Product. (Screengrab, RyanKeith TV, OTOP Exhibit Thailand, Zeer Mall, One Tambon One Product, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mo2gwZwxyk>).*

*\*Alexandra Dalferro is Visiting Fellow in the Thailand Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Her research focuses on the politics, practices, and history of silk production in Thailand, particularly among Khmer communities in Surin Province.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The OTOP programme sponsored by Thailand's Community Development Department (CDD) has become synonymous with "community economy" in Thailand's rural areas.
- OTOP stands for "One Tambon, One Product;" producers grouped by *tambon* or sub-district receive support from the CDD to develop a product particular to their locality.
- OTOP was initiated by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to enhance rural livelihoods and has remained popular among producers and consumers since its inception.
- OTOP profits are one source of income among many that together compose a "multi-sited livelihood", helping Thai people to cope with ongoing economic precarity.
- Even before, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, many producers have struggled to make money from their OTOP goods.
- Case study interviews indicate that the CDD has responded to challenges posed by COVID-19 by making adaptations to the OTOP programme rather than radically changing its structure and premise.
- OTOP can be viewed as a programme that facilitates adaptation to conditions of precarity rather than as a means to overcome economic instability.

## INTRODUCTION

*Thai people all over the country, every person is ingenious and persistent  
With intense kindness, just like marvellous holy water*

(Men sing) *We love our lineage*

(Women sing) *We love one another like relatives*

(Men sing) *We love the kingdom*

(Women sing) *We love sources of livelihood*

*(Together) The lord of the land, the local places of Thailand, we love forever  
Building a foundation and having work to do  
Implementing activities, we are rich because... we help ourselves.<sup>1</sup>*

Thailand's Community Development Department (CDD) released this song, "The Community Development March", on its YouTube channel on 9 February 2022. The accompanying music video opens with shots of groups of CDD officers striding through the forest, and standing with arms resolutely crossed in front of jagged cliffs, azure seas and vegetable gardens. The officers then join people in planting rice, fishing, bowing towards images of Rama X and his father, weaving silk and making other handicrafts. In some clips, people all wear masks, indicating that the video was created during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the masks are the only evidence of the ongoing challenges that the pandemic has posed for Thailand, especially for communities dependent on revenue from tourism and the sale of products like those depicted in the video.

With its buoyant tempo and lyrics, the CDD march is perhaps intended to boost morale among beleaguered Thai citizens and to reinforce some of the central tenets of Thai national identity, such as devotion to the monarchy. The song also encapsulates the department's official vision, "A stable economy and self-reliant communities", around which its mission and four-point strategy are constructed. If and when the CDD succeeds in realizing this vision, its work would be finished – and thus its continued existence hinges on never-ending development projects and never-fully-realized stability and self-reliance.

This paper explores the inherent paradoxes in the work of the CDD, and, relatedly, its role in promoting the production and consumption of local products. Such products are ubiquitous in villages across Thailand and are viewed as an important part of local economies, with hopes pinned on their potential to facilitate post-pandemic economic recovery. While their production often endows creators with enhanced social capital, material benefits do not always follow, especially in the 20 provinces that comprise Isan, Thailand's Northeastern region. This paper argues that, despite the sincerity and good intentions of many CDD workers across Thailand, the department lacks fundamental understanding of the diverse economic, sociocultural and political circumstances of people located geographically beyond Thailand's urban centres.<sup>2</sup> While these populations are often perceived as experiencing a "lack" of material resources, knowledge, and the capacity for self-reliance, it is in fact policymakers who have a dearth of awareness about the nature of regional precarity and the ways their programming increases livelihood instability for rural

inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The OTOP programme is one example of a project that seeks to improve economic conditions for Thai people in rural areas but in fact may only achieve the opposite. As state offices like the CDD design post-pandemic economic recovery plans to support these communities, they should also consider minimizing the outsized presence of OTOP.

## THE CDD AND OTOP

The Community Development Department is part of Thailand's Ministry of Interior (MOI). It traces its approach to community development back to 1940, when the MOI initiated a plan to improve living conditions in rural areas and to empower rural people to help them become "good citizens".<sup>4</sup> Today, the CDD has offices in every province in Thailand, and 878 offices at the district level.<sup>5</sup> It is thus a crucial node of connection between state representatives and Thai people in rural areas, as CDD officers appointed to provincial- and district-level positions interact regularly with village leaders and village inhabitants to seek to enhance livelihoods, expand local economies, and promote self-reliance according to the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.<sup>6 7</sup>

The CDD's abstract objectives are concretized in a variety of training and programmes, of which one of the latter is perhaps most recognized among Thai people: OTOP, or "One Tambon, One Product". A tambon is a sub-district, and, under the OTOP programme, producers grouped by sub-district receive support from the CDD to develop a product particular to their locality.<sup>8</sup> OTOP products are divided into five broad categories that range from food to textiles. Before products can be labelled with the OTOP brand and sold, they must undergo evaluation for quality, consistency and uniqueness. Criteria vary depending on the type of product, but overall considerations include the product's materialization of a "local story" that reflects the place where it was created, epitomizing one of the programme's unstated objectives of making sanctioned forms of "Thainess" commodifiable and consumable.<sup>9</sup> At the end of this evaluation process, the CDD assigns stars to products, following a 100-point system; any product with three to five stars is saleable, while products receiving one or two stars are enrolled in CDD programmes for improvement. OTOP promotional materials are designed in ways that implore Thai people to *chop chuai chat*, or "shop to help the nation", a request that exposes the incompatibility of this consumption-driven initiative with the CDD's philosophical underpinnings rooted in ideals of moderation and mindful resource use.

OTOP was initiated in 2001, and many OTOP producers and consumers still associate it with its creator, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin's widespread popularity, particularly among inhabitants of Thailand's North and Northeast, is due in part to projects such as OTOP which sought to reduce rural poverty and to enfranchise groups historically excluded from spaces and positions of power.<sup>10</sup>

## OTOP POLICIES AND ECONOMICS

OTOP products are mostly sold and consumed outside of their locations of production, mainly at large festivals held three times a year at the Mueang Thong Thani convention centre in Bangkok. Annual provincial-level fairs are common in provinces with many producer groups, and OTOp products can also be purchased at established markets and shops in provincial capitals and villages. Being invited by the CDD to sell at the Mueang Thong fairs in Bangkok is the goal and dream of many producers, as it both signifies that their products are well-regarded by local CDD officers and presents opportunities for them to earn increased revenue. For an OTOp producer group to participate in the Mueang Thong fairs, its product must earn at least a four-star rating. But not all such groups may participate in the fairs, and the selection of OTOp producer groups for the fairs can be competitive and contentious. No standardized protocol is in place across provinces,<sup>11</sup> and producer groups often remark on how the same groups are invited again and again, a non-transparent practice belying the CDD's goal of equitable income expansion for all.

Districts do receive a number of slots calculated on the basis of the number of producers active in a given district, divided by product category. CDD officers in a district with many OTOp textile-producing groups would thus be permitted to invite a larger number of textile-producing groups to sell their products at Mueang Thong. This method also causes provinces with the most OTOp producer groups to be more represented at national fairs. The most recent data gathered by the CDD, covering 2016-2019, indicate that 87,468 producer groups<sup>12</sup> are active across Thailand. The provinces with the most registered groups are Buriram with 3,143 groups, followed by Surin with 2,831 groups, and then Khon Kaen with 2,682 groups. 186,356 distinct products have been registered from groups across Thailand. The highest number of products from a single province come from Chiang Mai with 6,501 products, followed by Buriram with 5,700 products, and then Ubon Ratchathani with 5,409 products. Except for Chiang Mai, the provinces listed here are all located in Isan, illustrating the significance of the OTOp programme to the regional economy and to local livelihoods.

But how much profit does OTOp actually generate for producers? The programme is so extensive that differentiated data are not publicly available at a single source. In the OTOp Data pages on the CDD's official OTOp website, annual profits for 2015 through 2019 for each of the three major Mueang Thong fairs are listed. In 2019, combined profits from the three fairs totalled 3,488.7 million baht (US\$106.2 million).<sup>13</sup> How this figure translates into the earnings of separate producer groups is impossible to know without further differentiation and research. Many groups take out significant loans to cover costs such as transportation of people and products to the fairs, as well as accommodation and food for the nine-day stays in Bangkok. The CDD provides booth spaces for groups to set up their product displays, but offers no other material support to facilitate participation. Village-level producers often barely break even or, in bad years, remain in debt after the fairs end, and they worry about the time they spend at the fairs away from home, where they could be engaging in more productive activities like farming or the actual making of their products.<sup>14</sup>  
<sup>15</sup> Yet they also fear that if they refuse the invitation from CDD officers to attend the

Mueang Thong festivals, they will not be invited again in the future, and this could impact their local opportunities as well.<sup>16</sup> Though some producers derive their primary source of income from OTOP, most depend on OTOP profits as a still-crucial component of a patchwork or “multi-sited” livelihood that may include smallholder farming, wage labour, remittances, and commerce-related activities, among others.<sup>17</sup> Such multi-sited livelihoods are emblematic of the conditions of precarity that shape the lives of many Thai people, and OTOP is but one more trickle of income joining multiple streams which remain insufficient.

The CDD allocates significant budgetary resources to the OTOP programme. The total budget for the Ministry of Interior (MOI) in 2021 was 333.40 billion baht, with 6.17 billion baht going to the CDD.<sup>18</sup> The CDD used 46.7 per cent (2.89 billion baht) of this amount for internal operational costs such as salaries of personnel, and the rest for its programming, with 13 major projects and programmes in 2021. The Programme to Develop Community Products received 291.3 million baht, or 8.9 per cent of this programming budget, making it the fourth most-funded project out of the 13 initiatives.<sup>19</sup> For comparison, in 2020, the MOI’s budget was 412.57 billion baht, and the CDD received 6.59 billion baht in total. 43.3 per cent (2.85 billion baht) of this amount was again used for internal costs, and the rest was distributed across 15 major projects and programmes.<sup>20</sup> The Programme to Develop Community Products received 412.6 million baht, or 11.0 per cent of the programming budget. Additional programmes in both 2021 and 2020 included OTOP components in their objectives, such as the “Programme to Promote the Development of Mechanisms and Structures to Absorb Economic Value and Distribute Income”, and the “Programme to Enhance the Potential of Young Farmers and Entrepreneurs and Community Enterprises that Produce Community Products”, meaning that OTOP received funding outside of its main category, and illustrating the infiltration of OTOP across CDD programmes as a major signifier “community economy”.

## PANDEMIC IMPACTS

The decrease in the OTOP budget for 2021 may be due in part to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, though the CDD’s budget documents do not explicitly establish a causal relationship. As COVID-19 spread, plans for upcoming OTOP festivals were quickly cancelled. Producers were faced with a surplus of products and few customers, as Thai people initially reduced domestic travel and spent less money amidst fears of job loss and increased economic precarity. The government has extended multiple stimulus packages to support individuals registered with the Social Security scheme and workers in the informal sector, and has focused especially on strategies for reviving the tourism sector. Many Thai people, however, continue to struggle with the pandemic’s multifarious effects.

Isan is the most populous and historically poorest region of Thailand, and in an Asia Foundation study, *Thailand’s Inequality: Myths and Reality of Isan*, conducted from late 2017 to April 2019 and consisting of a randomized survey of 1,400 households and 160 interviews, 55 per cent of respondents noted that the country was moving in a bad direction, with 74 per cent citing a bad economy.<sup>21</sup> These findings resonate with the 2020 World Bank

Report that tracked an increase in Thailand's official poverty rate from 7.21 per cent to 9.85 per cent between 2015 and 2018.<sup>22</sup> The pandemic has only increased inequality in a country whose wealth gap tops world rankings. A 2020 Asia Foundation study, *Enduring the Pandemic: Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People*, concludes that the incomes of 70 per cent of the Thai workforce have fallen since the pandemic started.<sup>23</sup> The report also emphasizes that 55 per cent of workers who are informally employed are especially subject to loss of income; most OTOP producers would fall into this category. In the meantime, by July 2021, the aggregated assets of the kingdom's 50 richest families had risen more than 20 per cent to US\$160 billion since such wealth was last measured in June 2020.<sup>24</sup>

The CDD has responded to the pandemic in multiple ways, and with varying degrees of success. It has sought to encourage shopping for OTOP goods via digital platforms instead of in-person. The homepage of every provincial CDD office website features a menu of premium OTOP products that can seemingly be purchased directly from the CDD website. Upon clicking to select specific products, however, potential customers are directed to webpages that list the physical address and contact information of the producer group in question. The customer must then contact producers to inquire about the product, and the initial promise of convenience is eclipsed by realities of the difficulty of operationalizing large-scale online commerce for thousands of small-scale producers spread across 76 provinces.<sup>25</sup> A CDD officer based in Surin emphasized that most OTOP producers have barely made any money from their products since the pandemic started.<sup>26</sup>

Out of the five categories of OTOP products – food, beverages, household goods and souvenirs, textiles and clothing, and non-food herbal products – registered products in the categories of food and textiles and clothing are typically most numerous in any given year.<sup>27</sup> Thus, as the pandemic continues, many CDD officers at the provincial and district level have focused on expanding access and opportunities within the categories of food and textiles.<sup>28</sup> In Buriram province, which has the highest numbers of both producer groups and OTOP products, they have urged makers of products that are not selling well to switch to making OTOP food products, especially foods that can be sent to Thai people suffering from COVID-19. Textile producers have participated in CDD trainings where they compete to design official “district patterns” that capture the identity of their district. These patterns are then distributed among producer groups, and the finished textiles are marketed to local officials and teachers who can incorporate them into their uniforms.<sup>29</sup> Holding training courses is still difficult; the number of participants remain limited, and many are unwilling to participate out of fear of COVID-19 transmission.

## CONCLUSION

Although participation in OTOP might contribute to rural Thai people's ability to cover monthly bills and debt payments, it offers little hope for upward mobility or escape from the burden of constant indebtedness. In July 2021, household debt in Thailand reached an

18-year high, at 90.5 per cent of the GDP. In Isan in 2017, debt was estimated at 75 per cent of annual household income, compared to the national average of 60 per cent.<sup>30</sup>

Though the CDD's stated objective across many of its programmes is to support Thai people so that they can reduce debt, OTOP does not offer mechanisms for producers to be able to do this. It exists within the formal sector but is characterized by informal-like working practices,<sup>31</sup> and producers are not able to rely on the programme for consistent income or other forms of protection usually guaranteed by formal-sector employment. The existence and features of OTOP thus represent an adaptation to precarity rather than a pathway to reduce it. Moreover, the consumerist rationale of OTOP only reinforces social and economic hierarchies as wealthy Thai people enact roles as patrons at OTOP festivals, buying goods to do good.

Achieving actual good outcomes for participants in OTOP programmes will require different strategies from the CDD, and a thorough understanding of how precarity is experienced by Thai people in rural areas – not as something they have brought upon themselves due to different kinds of “lack”, but as a condition intimately shaped by Thailand's own approach over time to “development” and “modernization”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened livelihood instability for millions of Thai people who have sought to make do and get by from within the confines of state-sponsored programmes such as OTOP. But OTOP does not offer a clear path to economic recovery or community flourishing. As post-pandemic plans are considered and implemented, new approaches are desperately needed that harness the energy and resources directed towards OTOP and use them in initiatives designed from specific bottom-up contexts.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [Community Development Department] (2022a) *Phleng March Phatthana Chumchon* [Community Development March] [online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBfqjHX534E&list=PLGMLybXvLRg87as1mYx2RAHBMC2\\_VdP-Q&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBfqjHX534E&list=PLGMLybXvLRg87as1mYx2RAHBMC2_VdP-Q&index=2)] YouTube (accessed 14 March 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Delineating and defining “rural Thailand” is a challenging – and sometimes unproductive – task, as Jonathan Rigg illuminates in his 2019 monograph, *More Than Rural: Textures of Thailand's Agrarian Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press). Rigg maintains, “There is no discrete population of peasants with their feet in the paddy fields and their mind in the village. Millions of ‘farmers’ have worked in urban contexts and industrial employment, often overseas. They have engaged with the wider world, often for many years, and have knowledge of that world. Moreover, millions more rural migrants reside in urban areas, even if they do not ‘live’ there. Rural Thais are not cut off and isolated from the key currents of transformation; indeed, they have played a large role in forging and propelling those currents” (2019:2). For in-depth analysis of Thailand's “political peasants” see Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) and for discussion of “cosmopolitan villagers” see Charles Keyes, “‘Cosmopolitan’ Villagers and Populist Democracy



in Thailand” (*South East Asia Research*, 20(3) 2012, 343–360), and *Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis on the need to take the concept of “precarity” seriously when analyzing the Thai economy and the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, see Mike Montesano, “Thailand: Time to Acknowledge Precarity?” [online: [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_119.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_119.pdf)] *Perspective* 119, 2020, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (accessed 18 March 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [Community Development Department] (2022) *Prawat krom* [History of the Department] [online: <https://www.cdd.go.th/related-links/%e0%b8%9a%e0%b8%a3%e0%b8%b4%e0%b8%81%e0%b8%b2%e0%b8%a3%e0%b8%a0%e0%b8%b2%e0%b8%a2%e0%b9%83%e0%b8%99/about-us/%e0%b8%9b%e0%b8%a3%e0%b8%b0%e0%b8%a7%e0%b8%b1%e0%b8%95%e0%b8%b4%e0%b8%81%e0%b8%a3%e0%b8%a1>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022). The “History of the Department” section of the CDD’s webpage reads: “In 1940, rural reconstruction plans were developed with two objectives: to evolve the lives and spirits of people in rural areas so that they are in an appropriate position to be good citizens, and to promote better living conditions” (Ibid.).

<sup>5</sup> Provinces in Thailand are made up of districts called *amphoe*, which in turn are made up of subdistricts called *tambon*.

<sup>6</sup> Krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [Community Development Department (CDD)] (2016) *Phaen yutthasat krom pahthana chumchon* [Strategy Plan for the Community Development Department 2017-2021] [online: <https://plan.cdd.go.th/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2017/05/yut60-64.pdf>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022).

<sup>7</sup> This approach to sustainable development was delineated by the late Rama IX in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s. It centres on values of moderation, prudence and reasonableness, or, in the words of the king, “[being] happy with however little we have” (NESDB 2007). Scholars note tensions that make observance of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy impossible; “development”, or capitalist modernisation, has always been propelled by the creation of desires for material things (Sulak Sivaraksa, *A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society: Collected Articles by a Concerned Thai Intellectual*. Bangkok: Tienwan, 1986, in Rigg 2019). The philosophy is articulated to target individuals, especially those who are also members of Thailand’s rural populations. It thus functions as a technology to discipline the poor, with members of the elite political ruling class positioned as exceptions, possessing no desirous behaviours in need of reform. Possibilities for structural critique are foreclosed in favour of discourses that blame the poor for dynamics shaped by government policies created in Bangkok. For an extensive analysis of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, see: Robert Dayley, “Thailand’s Agrarian Myth and its Proponents.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 46(4) 2011: 342-360; Eli Elinoff, “Sufficient Citizens: Moderation and the Politics of Sustainable Development in Thailand,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 37 (1) 2014: 89-108; S. Ivarsson, “King, Coup and Sufficiency Economy: The Quest for Political Legitimacy,” *NIAS Nytt* 3, 2007: 23-26; Darunee Jongudomkarn & Laura Camfield, “Exploring the Quality of Life of People in North Eastern and Southern Thailand.” WeD working paper 11, ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries, University of Bath, Bath, UK, 2005; Pornkasem Kantamara, “The ‘New Theory’ for the Agricultural Sector,” in *Sufficiency Thinking: Thailand’s Gift to an Unsustainable World*, eds. Gayle Avery & Harald Bergsteiner, Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2016, 55-74; Rigg 2019; Amalia Rossi, “Turning Red Rural Landscapes Yellow? Sufficiency Economy and Royal Projects in the Hills of Nan Province, Northern Thailand,” *ASEAS-Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 5(2) 2012: 275-291; Danny Unger,

“Sufficiency Economy and the Bourgeois Virtues,” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 36(3) 2009: 139-156; and Walker 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Despite OTOP’s name, which suggests that each *tambon* has only one product, many subdistricts are home to more than one producer or producer group, and thus a variety of products are available.

<sup>9</sup> Samnak songsoem phumpanya thongthin lae wisahakit chumchon krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [The Office for the Promotion of Local Knowledge and Community Enterprises, Community Development Department] (2019) *Phalittaphan OTOP* [OTOP Products] [online: <https://cep.cdd.go.th/otop-data/%e0%b8%9c%e0%b8%a5%e0%b8%b4%e0%b8%95%e0%b8%a0%e0%b8%b1%e0%b8%93%e0%b8%91%e0%b9%8c-otop>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022).

<sup>10</sup> The programme is modelled after Japan’s OVOP, or “One Village, One Product” programme, which was launched in 1979 as a strategy to alleviate the impacts of rapid industrialization, such as rural out-migration and social atomisation, on the Japanese countryside. Then-governor and Oita Prefecture local Morihiko Hiramatsu worked with people in villages in the prefecture to develop already-popular food staples, focusing on improving them and their sales through community-based participation and revitalization rather than through reliance on government policies and subsidies (Yoopin Claymone and Watunyu Jaiborisudhi, “A study on one village one product project (OVOP) in Japan and Thailand as an alternative of community development in Indonesia.” *International Journal of East Asian Studies* 16(1) 2011: 51-60). OVOP goods were intended to be sold and consumed primarily within local communities of production, in line with the programme’s commitment to environmental protection and economical resource use (Ibid.). These details about OVOP comprise key differences with OTOP that even CDD officers are quick to point out – namely, OTOP in Thailand is “top-down”, managed and implemented through policy directives created at the national level (“Yot”, CDD officer at national office, Interview with the author, 2018). OTOP was terminated in 2006 after Thaksin was ousted in a military coup, but by that time participants and consumers were already attached to it, and called for its reinstatement. Seeking to rebrand the programme that was closely linked to Thaksin and his so-called populist agenda, officials changed the name to *Phalittaphan Chumchon*, or Community Products, but to no avail. OTOP had been too catchy a term, and people continued to call the programme by its original name. After five months, the government relented and readopted OTOP. Since then, every successive government has included OTOP as part of its policy agenda (Ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> “Pom,” CDD officer in Surin Province, Interview with the author, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> The term “producer groups” actually refers to both groups and individuals as well, who engage in the production of OTOP products, as individuals are permitted to register and receive the same considerations and opportunities as groups. Differentiated data on the number of multiple-person groups versus individuals registered as “groups” have not been located at the time of this article’s publication.

<sup>13</sup> The CDD allocates approximately 85 million baht as the budget for each festival, or 2.6 million USD (Samnak songsoem phumpanya thongthin lae wisahakit chumchon krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [The Office for the Promotion of Local Knowledge and Community Enterprises, Community Development Department] [OPLKCE] (2022) *Kantalat* [Marketing] [online: <https://cep.cdd.go.th/otop-data/%e0%b8%81%e0%b8%b2%e0%b8%a3%e0%b8%95%e0%b8%a5%e0%b8%b2%e0%b8%94>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022).

<sup>14</sup> “Yi,” OTOP producer in Surin Province, Interview with the author, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> These worries are also tempered by the enjoyment and pleasure that many producers experience at fairs, where they have the chance to spend extended time with friends from their home provinces and from around Thailand whom they have met through OTOP and only see when they travel to the fairs in Bangkok.

- <sup>16</sup> “Suphap,” OTOP producer in Surin Province, Interview with the author, 2019.
- <sup>17</sup> *More than Rural: Textures of Thailand’s Agrarian Transformation*, 2019.
- <sup>18</sup> Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) (2021) *Rainan kanwikhro ngop praman rajjai prajam pi ngop praman 2564* [Report of analysis of the annual budget for budget year 2021] [online: [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parbudget/download/article/article\\_20200826093713.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parbudget/download/article/article_20200826093713.pdf)] Parliamentary Budget Office (accessed 14 March 2022).
- <sup>19</sup> The 12 programmes that do not have an explicit focus on OTOP still included OTOP-related components in programme objectives and funding categories. The least-funded project for 2021 was the Programme to Promote the Management of Community Tourism, which received only 12.4 million baht, or 0.37 per cent of the programming budget of 3.29 billion baht. The project that received the most funding in 2021 was the Project to Develop Sufficiency Economy Villages, with allocated funds of 1.22 billion baht, or 37.1 per cent of the remaining budget for CDD projects and programmes (PBO 2021).
- <sup>20</sup> Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) (2020) *Rainan kanwikhro ngop praman rajjai prajam pi ngop praman 2563* [Report of analysis of the annual budget for budget year 2020] [online: [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parbudget/download/article/article\\_20191213151321.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/parbudget/download/article/article_20191213151321.pdf)] Parliamentary Budget Office (accessed 14 March 2022).
- <sup>21</sup> The Asia Foundation; Rattana Lao, Thomas I. Parks, Charn Sangvirojkul, Aram Lek-Uthai, Atipong Pathanasethpong, Pii Arporniem, Thannaporn Takkhin, & Kroekkiat Tiamsai (2019) *Thailand’s Inequality: Myths & Reality of Isan* [online: [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TH\\_Isan\\_report\\_2019\\_re.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/TH_Isan_report_2019_re.pdf)] Bangkok: The Asia Foundation (accessed 18 March 2022).
- <sup>22</sup> Thailand does have a notable record for reducing poverty and eradicating extreme poverty: “Over the past three decades, and since official poverty data were first published in 1988, Thailand has made substantial gains on key social and economic development. Official poverty rates reduced from 65.2% in 1988 to 9.85% in 2018” (The World Bank, “Publication: Taking the Pulse of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand”, 5 March 2020 [online: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/614661586924075867/pdf/Taking-the-Pulse-of-Poverty-and-Inequality-in-Thailand.pdf>] The World Bank (accessed 18 March 2022).
- <sup>23</sup> The Asia Foundation; Thomas Parks, Matthew Chatsuwon & Sunil Pillai (2020) *Enduring the Pandemic: Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People* [online: <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Enduring-the-Pandemic-Covid-19-Impact-on-Thailand-Livlihoods-Sept-2020.pdf>] Bangkok: The Asia Foundation (Accessed 18 March 2022).
- <sup>24</sup> Forbes, “Wealth Of Thailand’s 50 Richest On Forbes List Rises Amid Pandemic Challenges.” 8 July 2021 [online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbespr/2021/07/07/wealth-of-thailands-50-richest-on-forbes-list-rises-amid-pandemic-challenges/?sh=592972875e2e>] Forbes, (Accessed 18 March 2022).
- <sup>25</sup> The publicity generated by these sites may still benefit some producers and help them to make sales over Facebook Marketplace or LINE, which are common channels for direct producer-to-consumer OTOP sales. However, even though many producers do have smartphones with internet access, they lack the necessary knowledge and skills—in areas such as taking appealing product photos—to set up lucrative online shops.
- <sup>26</sup> “Joy,” CDD officer in Surin Province, Interview with the author, 2022.
- <sup>27</sup> Samnak songsoem phumpanya thongthin lae wisahakit chumchon krom Kanphatthana Chumchon [The Office for the Promotion of Local Knowledge and Community Enterprises, Community Development Department] [OPLKCE] (2019) *Phalittaphan OTOP* [OTOP Products] [online: <https://cep.cdd.go.th/otop-data/%e0%b8%9c%e0%b8%a5%e0%b8%b4%e0%b8%95%e0%b8%a0%e0%b8%b1%e0%b8%93%e0%b8%91%e0%b9%8c-otop>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022). Samnak songsoem phumpanya thongthin lae wisahakit chumchon krom Kanphatthana

Chumchon [The Office for the Promotion of Local Knowledge and Community Enterprises, Community Development Department] [OPLKCE] (2020) *Botsarup Puborihan* [Executive Summary] [online: <https://cep.cdd.go.th/wp-content/uploads/sites/108/2020/06/%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%97%E0%B8%AA%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B8%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%9C%E0%B8%B9%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%A3%E0%B8%B4%E0%B8%AB%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%A3.pdf>] Community Development Department (accessed 14 March 2022).

<sup>28</sup> “Lek,” CDD officer in Buriram Province, Interview with the author, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> The district pattern concept is reminiscent of a campaign launched in December 2020, when Princess Sirivannavari Nariratana designed a textile pattern that was bestowed upon producers across Thailand. The pattern comprised of a repeating, hooked letter “S” for Sirivannavari, with a border of hearts that symbolises her love for all Thai people. The CDD helps to promote the production of this pattern, recognizing it as an opportunity for producers to sell goods to government workers in all places and at all levels. The “S” textiles appear repeatedly in the CDD march video, both on the looms of weavers and on the bodies of CDD workers, as well as on the CDD OTOP homepage, emphasizing the department’s commitment to this royal initiative and state efforts to reinvigorate the status of the Thai monarchy after the death of Rama IX. Not all producers enjoy making these S textiles, however. They feel forced to produce them, and they are not keen to wear the pattern themselves, viewing it as something expressly designed to clothe civil servants to fulfil government policy (“Ploy,” OTOP producer, Interview with the author, 2021). Sharing these sentiments publicly is difficult and dangerous due to Article 112 of Thailand’s criminal code, or the lèse majesté law, which forbids defaming, insulting or threatening members of the Thai royal family. Most producers keep quiet and keep weaving, as the S textiles have enabled them to make some money during hard times.

<sup>30</sup> *Thailand’s Inequality: Myths & Reality of Isan*, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> *More than Rural: Textures of Thailand’s Agrarian Transformation*, 2019: 186-187.

<p><b>ISEAS Perspective</b> is published electronically by: <b>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</b></p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: <a href="https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support">https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</a></p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Editorial Committee: Terence Chong, Cassey Lee, Norshahril Saat, and Hoang Thi Ha.</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: William Choong, Lee Poh Onn, Lee Sue-Ann, and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--