

Mr Vin (Photmetui Thepsombat)



Pa Kha village is located along a main road in Kun Tan district of Chiang Rai province. It is close to the Ing River, and is quite low-lying, with the village centre, including village hall, health station, temple and rice bank barn being located on slightly higher ground. It currently comprises 126 households, with a total population of 571. Of these, there are 139 elderly people, and 38 People with Disability – two of these are bed-bound. Irrigated rice and corn are the main crops, and livestock raising for market is also important. Fish catch from the Ing River has also been a major source of livelihood.

Mr Vin (Photmetui Thepsombat).

Mr Vin was one of a small number of younger people at the meeting called by the village head. He was one of the 'strong men' identified in the village disaster management plan as someone who could assist community members at risk from flooding, as outlined by the village head in his initial presentation. He asked to be addressed simply as Vin, his nickname. His parents are farmers, but he doesn't farm himself, and works full-time as an immigration officer at the Chiang Khong border.

He described how the night before the flood, at midnight, the village head announced over the PA system.

The flood preparedness training and planning sessions for village disaster management had actually just been run by MFU and local partners one month before the extreme flash flood happened. The training activity had explored with the community all the likely changes in the Ing River and related risk of disaster. Like the village head who had spoken earlier, Mr Vin mentioned how the flood event had raised the community's awareness of the need to give more attention to improving their disaster management mechanism, including the early warning system in place – it brought home all of the issues covered in the training.

Mr Vin said that as soon as the announcement was made of the need to evacuate:

"I knew what I had to do, according to the plan."

He described how he got out the tractor to evacuate People with Disability - the tractor was the best vehicle to move people with mobility problems in wet conditions with flood waters rising fast, and tractors were also used to bring the livestock to high ground.

He said he knew where to evacuate people to, as the centre had been agreed and established in the months before the flood. The area where the village's official buildings and the health centre stand are the highest point of the village area, and with the best access to a main sealed road. There was a team of several men, like him, all using tractors to evacuate people and livestock. When the flood waters were higher, they switched to using boats.

People knew about the likelihood of the floods Mr Vin said, as they'd been hearing about other areas not far away being flooded. When news came from upstream, via the smartphone app as well as word of mouth, they knew that the first priority was to go to the aid of People with Disability. He mentioned that high rainfall wasn't the only factor increasing flood risk - he and others were also aware of the impact of major new infrastructure in the region and how that could aggravate the flood severity, through changing the patterns of water flow.

A coordination post was set up in the village next morning to receive donations, he said, and they used social media to call for help. Another young man—highlighted by the village head in the display board photo—used a boat to deliver food and clean drinking water to residents who had chosen to stay in their still-habitable homes. As the village head's assistant, he had been

assigned this role in advance under the disaster management plan, Mr. Vin explained, which allowed the operation to begin without delay. As for the future, Mr. Vin said they already know the plan and protocol. When it comes to food supply, they know what to source and where to get it. If farmers lose their rice crop, the government will provide them with seed rice.

Mr Vin then showed us the village rice bank, a large wooden barn situated in the village. He and others present explained that the structure and the system of loans and returns had been set up by the village several years before the flood, as a means of ensuring secure supply of seed rice without farmers having to go into debt. The standard was that for every 35kg of seed rice you borrowed, you would pay that back at harvest, plus a further 5kg. The system had worked well, they agreed, but it was placed under severe stress following the flood as so many farmers had lost their crop and had no seed stocks. MFU provided six tonnes of seed rice out of SCR project funds, to be managed according to the same system the village had already established. This helped the community to reactivate their own system as an integral part of the immediate recovery, and to strengthen their food security for the longer term. There were also other donations, including from individual DFAT staff who had visited.

Returning after the floods to the more regular round of planting and harvesting, last harvest, 4 tonnes of rice – loans plus repayment extra – were provided from the rice bank, Mr Vin explained. There was also an agreement reached as to how this could be lent to those in need who didn't farm their own rice, and this was used for seven families. There is still 2.4 tonnes ready for use if needed. Everyone in the village plants the same variety of rice, he said, and it has a relatively quick three-month growing period.