

**Mr Son Thepsombat, Village head - Pa
Kha**



Pa Kha village is located along Phahonyothin 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. In his introduction, the village head told us 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 Son Thepsombat, the village head, told us he had been elected village head in 2017, and is the eighteenth village head in the role since the village was founded in Buddhist year 2472 (1929). He had called a meeting of around 30 women and men to talk about their experience in flood preparation and response, and in developing resilient livelihoods. He began the meeting with a full audio-visual presentation of the village history and context, and both disaster preparation and response, before handing over to individual community members to speak.

The Strengthening Climate Resilience project began in Pa Kha just in the last year – 2566, he said, and it had already enabled the community to improve its capacity to cope with natural disasters. This was especially important in helping them to be prepared for the huge flood that hit last year. He and other members of the community have been very proud to be part of this, he said.

Mr Thepsombat said the community members are especially pleased that foreign countries have shown an interest in their village, showing pictures of the visit by DFAT staff after the flood and the response supported by the project and individual donations.

Last year's flood, he said, was the worst in the memory of all the village population; they had never experienced a flood like it, and initially, they felt hopeless. However, they are very glad that they had the support to recover from this.

The first step had been learning how to develop a plan to prevent and safeguard against natural disasters - he showed the diagrammatic representation of the plan, which is prominently displayed in the public assembly location, adjacent to the village rice bank.

He said that one important element of the plan at the outset had been drawing up a list of all the strong men in the village who could be able to help others.

He spoke about the village's Som Saing forest/wetland, which protects them from flooding, as it has the capacity to absorb a large volume of overflow from the Ing River, and is also important for protecting fisheries. He showed pictures of boats moving through the flood.

"We can only move forward", he said, "floods will happen, and reiterated that people from outside had come to help.

In addition to the audio-visual display on screen, Mr Thepsombat showed the permanent public display, which included a diagrammatic representation of the village's plan, which had been prepared in collaboration with MFU staff. It also included photos of people up to their knees in flood water; of the rescue team evacuating people by boat, and of the distribution of food, and fodder to buffalo. The fodder distribution, he said, was really important as there had been a lot of calves born just before the flood hit. Altogether, the village has 200 head of buffalo, and they had all been evacuated to high ground ahead of the rising flood.

The village has designated a fish conservation area, and he showed pictures of large fish caught there; and also, of village people processing fish for their consumption and for market. Before the project, he made clear, fishing was already an important part of people's livelihoods.

The community already had a strong recognition of the importance of protecting their fisheries, and this was a big reason for the status of the Som Saing wetland. This awareness was reflected in local practices and attitude toward sustainable resource use. In the past, as fishers in the community were just selling fresh fish, there was a lot of waste. The project introduced training on different processes for preserving the excess fish catch, and also on how to brand their produce and market it online. Now waste is reduced and incomes have been boosted.

Mr Son Thepsombat pointed out the photos of people planting tree saplings, emphasising the importance of trees for flood protection. Following the training provided under the project, and the activities that the community had undertaken, he said "We no longer see humans as the centre of everything."

That is, they have come to a clearer understanding of their interactions with the environment, the effects that climate change is having on these, and how they can interact with these for greater resilience and guaranteeing their future livelihoods.