

# INNOVATIVE PARTNERS

## The Rockefeller Foundation and Thailand

### Foreword

“To promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world” was a noble goal. A century long journey by the Rockefeller Foundation, since its inception in 1913, toward achieving that goal must have accumulated a wealth of experiences and knowledges. Dr. William H. Becker has admirably dug out that treasure and revealed it with insight in this report “INNOVATIVE PARTNERS” for every one to learn.

Although it started out by fighting hookworm, both in southern United States and elsewhere, which had led the Foundation into being a great proponent of public health and public health schools around the world, the Rockefeller Foundation quickly discovered that health or well-being of mankind was not limited to the so-called public health as such, but integrated in total human and social development.

But development is extremely difficult everywhere. The mere spending money or application of what is already known will not do. Thus the unsuccessfulness of development in the majority of places, either carried out locally or with assistance of international organizations. This makes innovative partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and Thailand a topic of particular interest.

Although Thailand still faces many challenges, in the past 100 years considerable progresses have occurred particularly in the fields of medicines, public health and education. Health care infrastructure is thoroughly distributed across the country and universal health coverage has been established. Health professional education is up to universal standard. Thailand has engaged in ambitious health systems reform and participated in global health activities. The Prince Mahidol Award and the Prince Mahidol Award Conference which has become world policy leadership forum represent in Thai interest to participate in top global health affairs.

Those humble progresses will not be possible without the background of human and organizational capacity building. The Rockefeller Foundation and the Thai partners were heavily committed to solid long term capacity building. The key component of the creative partnership was “interactive learning through action” which was possible only with mutual respect and trust. The Foundation and the Thai partner, both at the administrative and academic levels, worked together trustfully. In those days when the Thai were very sensitive to European colonial intrusion, agreement by Siriraj Medical School to have Foundation’s American professors as its dean and heads of academic departments, which had helped expedite organizational and academic capacity building, well reflected this trust. The innovative partnership was possible because the Thai leaders viewed the Rockefeller Foundation as value. Reciprocally, the Foundation found Prince Mahidol a man of virtue and high esteem, due to his palpable knowledge ability, dedication, and humbleness. Values are crucial for successful partnership.

Later partnership between the Rockefeller Foundation and Thailand in other areas such as the Green Revolution and Education for Development, the same spirit of “interactive learning through action” with mutual respect and trust prevailed. I had personally witnessed Dr. James S. Dinning of the Foundation, and the Thai side represented by Dr. Stang Monkolsuk and Dr. Swasdi Skulthai, diligently and wisely working together with great insight in strengthening in Faculty of Science of Mahidol University. This legendary success has increased the capacity of the country to produce more doctors and other health professions. It also led to inspiration to strengthen sciences in general in Thailand. The Rockefeller Foundation support of community health education at Ramathibodi Medical School had contributed to medical graduates of this school to be more community-oriented. These graduates have later played important roles in new health development, health systems reform and global health.

One unfinished, but very important, innovative partnership was the Rockefeller Foundation’s sponsored project for three universities, Agriculture, Thammasat and Mahidol to work together on the Mae Klong basin, led by Puey Ungpakorn the great. This project was disrupted by the political violence of October 6, 1976. Today it is recognized that universities’ strengthening of community and local organizations is very crucial for sustainable development.

In the late 1970s the Rockefeller Foundation, through the leadership of Ken Warren and Kerr White, launched a big movement called INCLEN (International Clinical Epidemiology Network). I had a privilege of working with the two great minds on this project. It aimed to train clinicians in the medical schools to use epidemiology in clinical decision. The objective was to introduce population-based medicine into the thinking and practice of the medical schools to prepare them for the future roles in health systems reform.

Not mentioned in this book, but relevant to health systems reform in Thailand, was the Foundation's support for the establishment of National Epidemiology Board (NEB) in the Ministry of Public Health, initiated by Scott B. Halstead the Associate Director of Health Science. The NEB had become a national forum leading to health systems reform conceptualization and development.

After a century of its inception in 1913 the world is even more in need of “to promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world” as initially envisioned by the Rockefeller Foundation. But the challenges now are more complex and difficult – the interconnected problems of poverty, population, aging, climatic crisis, income inequality, conflicts and violence, social disintegration, food crisis, scarcity of resources to cope with increasing burden, etc. The Foundation, well aware that programmatic approach is no longer appropriate to address the new situation, has reconceptualized its way forward to promote well-being of mankind. As reported here, it has wisely chosen system approach. Health or well-being of mankind is integral in total human and social development. Health systems transcend public health to integrated development of all sectors. Thus the Transforming Health System Initiative (THS) outlined in this report should be a central strategy to “promote the well-being of mankind throughout the world”.

The Rockefeller Foundation has chosen to base its regional operation in Thailand. If Thailand can claim success in anything at all, it is the health systems reform. This will help partnership between the Foundation and Thailand to work on the THS strategy. It is hoped that the spirit of good will and working togetherness shown throughout this report on “INNOVATIVE PARTNERS” will be a source of inspiration for concerned citizen, organizations and countries to work together for well-being of mankind throughout the world. Or to heal the world.

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