

22. Happiness-sharing pantries and the ‘easing of hunger for the needy’ in Thailand

Thanapat Chatinakrob

The COVID-19 pandemic directly affected the Thai economy and its growth projections, as Thailand was one of the first countries with cases (WHO 2020). The Thai economy, which relied on global trade, shrank by at least 5% in 2020 (World Bank 2020, p.4; USDA Foreign Agricultural Service 2020, pp.2–6). From March 2020, the service sector also faced a sharp decline in tourism and other related industries, such as transportation, accommodation, and food service activities. It accounted for approximately 15% of GDP (World Bank 2020, pp.8–11). Household welfare was likely to be more severely affected by the pandemic. The number of households living below US\$5.50 per day doubled, from 4.7 million in the first quarter of 2020 to an estimated 9.7 million in the second quarter of 2020 (World Bank 2020, pp.26–28). The Thai government came up with strategic preparedness and response plans (WHO 2020, pp.1–3) to tackle the pandemic and provide compensation for its people, but they were not adequate. Fortunately, several community-based initiatives arose as a bottom-up approach in challenging the pandemic. A key part of these stories in Thailand was a campaign called ‘happiness-sharing pantries’.

This chapter introduces community-led food-sharing initiatives in response to COVID-19 in Thailand through the happiness-sharing pantries campaign. It also analyses the operation and the effectiveness of this campaign, which was run by charities and local communities in Thailand. It is believed that the campaign not only contributed to the well-being of the needy during the pandemic but also revealed problems with social welfare structures and the social protection system in the country.

How to cite this book chapter:

Chatinakrob, Thanapat. 2022. ‘Happiness-sharing pantries and the ‘easing of hunger for the needy’ in Thailand’. In: Shin, Hyun Bang; Mckenzie, Murray; and Oh, Do Young (eds) *COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Insights for a post-pandemic world*. London: LSE Press, pp. 249–256. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.cov.v>
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The happiness-sharing pantries campaign

In March 2020, the happiness-sharing pantries campaign was introduced by the local community in Bangkok (Little Brick Group 2020). It began with the simple idea that people in the community could share food, daily necessities, or even medicines with those who needed them. The pantry used in this campaign was a common pantry or cupboard that almost every house in Thailand already had. The work of happiness-sharing pantries was also uncomplicated. Community members would place donations in a roadside cupboard, and people who were in need would take an appropriate amount of what they needed. It was suggested that people who obtained food would feel happy and people who donated them would feel the same (Thai News Service Group 2020).

It started from only five model pantries located at different places in Bangkok. This campaign aimed to alleviate the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, people believed that this campaign would not work, as the social structure of Thailand differs from other countries (Little Brick Group 2020). There was also a survey conducted by the Little Brick Group (2020) showing that no one would put free food in the pantries. Two weeks after the beginning of the campaign, however, the pantries were still in their original places and thus received substantial attention (Thai News Service Group 2020). The pantries were widely accepted and then increased in number throughout Thailand. Government agencies responded positively to the campaign and placed additional cupboards at the entrances of their offices (Thai News Service Group 2020). Temples, police stations, military camps, hospitals, local markets, and some supermarkets also joined the campaign (Thai News Service Group 2020). At the end of 2020, every province in Thailand had pantries, with most in urban areas and smaller numbers in rural provinces. There were more than 300 official pantries in Bangkok, more than 100 official pantries in Phuket, and more than 50 official pantries in Chonburi (Pattaya), with the total number of official pantries reaching more than 1,400 (Little Brick Group 2020). Table 22.1 lists the approximate number of pantries in each province of Thailand.

Why did the happiness-sharing pantries campaign work in Thailand? At least three key players contributed to this campaign: charities, local communities, and the government. No official source confirmed where the happiness-sharing pantries campaign originated, but one of the most likely sources was a group of 20 people named ‘Happiness-Sharing

Table 22.1. The approximate number of happiness-sharing pantries in each province of Thailand, as at 30 December 2020

Region	Number of happiness-sharing pantries
Central (including Bangkok)	692
Northern	157
North-eastern	142
Eastern	130
Western	68
Southern	283
Total	1,472

Source: Happiness-Sharing Pantries by Little Brick Group (2020).

Pantries by the Little Brick Group’, which was inspired by the ‘Little Free Pantry’ launched by Jessica McClard in the United States (Little Brick Group 2020). The Little Brick Group first installed five model pantries at different places in Bangkok. Even though the types and characteristics of the pantries had no formal standard, they had to resist heat and rain. They also required, if possible, a cover to prevent bugs or other animals from getting inside, as well as an accompanying sign that specified their purpose (Little Brick Group 2020). The pantries also needed to be noticeable and placed at accessible locations such as markets, public transportation stops, government service offices, and any other easily reachable community spaces.

The campaign was genuinely a local, bottom-up initiative. At the very first stage, the campaign was initiated by local communities; no government agency contributed to it. Every pantry nationwide was a locally based initiative. Local communities maintained this campaign by promoting feelings of shared ownership (Little Brick Group 2020). Even though each pantry technically belonged to a person in the community and someone had to be responsible for its installation, communities tried to build a consensus that everyone was an owner of the pantry, thus promoting a sense of shared ownership (Little Brick Group 2020). Feelings of shared ownership, sometimes called a sense of community ownership, require the participation of local communities in making decisions at every stage of the process (Bowen 2005, pp.78–86; Lachapelle 2008, pp.53–55). The feeling of shared ownership of happiness-sharing pantries in Thai local communities was promoted in the same way (Gingerella 2020; Thai News Service Group 2020): it became

a community event to take part in caring for the pantry, including filling up and taking out the right amount of food.

Setting up any instalments along the roadside in Thailand, however, needs official permission from the local authorities. Any pantry donor had to ask for permission from the relevant local authority in order to abide by the law, namely Section 39 of the Act on the Maintenance of the Cleanliness and Orderliness of the Country, B.E. 2535 (1992). This Act made it mandatory to request permission for any actions that might affect public places, such as installing a happiness-sharing pantry. Submitting such a request drew the attention of local authorities, especially police officers. They recognised the existence of the pantries, however, and even supported the regularity and orderliness of the pantries (Thai News Service Group 2020). For example, many central administration offices – such as the Ministry of Culture and the Department of Rural Roads – and provincial administration offices – such as the provincial governor of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai Administration, Chachoengsao City Municipality, and Phetchabun Local Administrative Office – joined the campaign by installing pantries in their own areas.

After the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration of Thailand (CCSA) announced the easing of Phase 5 restrictions from 1 July 2020 (National News Bureau of Thailand 2020), most business operations reopened, and the pantry scheme seemed to become less of a priority. People rarely donated food, and some pantries were abandoned. A civil society organisation called the PunSook (Happiness-Sharing) Society, however, was formed to coordinate and sustain the campaign (PunSook Society 2020). This permanent organisation was also supported by many governmental and non-governmental agencies, including the Digital Economy Promotion Agency, the Federation of Thai Industries, the State Railway of Thailand, the Transport Co., Ltd., and the Board of Trade of Thailand (PunSook Society 2020). Therefore, the PunSook Society could sustainably act as an agent between donors and the needy in the post-COVID-19 era.

The COVID-19 situation in Thailand seemed to be under control between July and December 2020, with no new cases. There were new clusters, however, after outbreaks in several provinces, including Samut Sakhon, Rayong, and Chonburi, in late December 2020 and April 2021. This resurgence of new clusters led to the reintroduction of the happiness-sharing pantries campaign to local communities in Thailand.

Social impacts

Whether there was a COVID-19 outbreak or not, the existence of happiness-sharing pantries for the distribution of foods to the needy could decrease economic and social disparities in Thai communities. The pantries require neither minimum nor maximum donations, as the idea of the pantries comes from only sharing small portions of leftover food in any household's kitchen that could be shared with others (Little Brick Group 2020).

Several scholars have realised that the pantries reflect the structural problems of social welfare and the social security system in Thailand (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020; Nattaya 2020). Although the campaign intended to help people who were economically affected by the pandemic, chaos still raged in the community: some groups of people tried to take excessive amounts of supplies out of the pantries. As a result, those people were seen as selfish. On the other hand, this problem remained only somewhat controversial. Some critics believed that donors should give without worrying about what recipients would take, which was more or less what they did.

The scramble for donated items from the pantries exposed social welfare problems in Thai society. This has been called 'the gleaning welfare system': people must mainly be responsible for themselves primarily, and the government would provide only partial assistance since it does not view social welfare as a system for achieving the equity of all citizens. Therefore, the burden of ensuring social security must be borne by the people, who consequently tried to collect as much of the donations as possible to survive, as they did not know whether there would be donations left if they came to the pantries the next day. Interestingly, many experts believe that such behaviour was displayed not only by the poor but by people of all socio-economic classes owing to inequality (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020).

Furthermore, scrambling for donations likely occurred most often in communities where resources were not distributed evenly and fairly and people did not believe that government aid mechanisms were effective enough (Ariyaprichya et al. 2020). Therefore, if the government had a mechanism that could assure that people would be able to live well at a basic level, these people would only need to worry about taking just enough donated items from the pantries for that day such that, if they needed more the following day, they could simply visit again to

pick up more items. Scrambling for donations might then be reduced. Otherwise, if they were unsure whether there would be enough donations the next day, they would naturally choose to stockpile. Hence, such behaviours might have derived from the structural social welfare problems that forced them to struggle for survival.

Moreover, the existence of the pantries also demonstrated the ability of people in communities to express their social responsibilities (Ariyapruhya et al. 2020). Many times, people chose not to follow society's rules because of their financial and social status. Whenever people were insecure, they were unable to exercise their social responsibility. Proper picking of donated items thus could not happen. In addition, this could occur in societies with high inequality, especially where the poor are deprived of social rights: whenever these people saw an opportunity to take advantage of donations, they would take it.

It must then be asked whether the happiness-sharing pantries were suitable for Thai society or for solving the problem of hunger for the poor in Thailand. Supporting one another is a common practice in Thai society, and the pantries were a means of solving the problems at hand in helping the needy. It has been observed, however, that the existence of pantries might not have been suitable for the Thai social structure. Even though there were still many pantries in Thailand by the end of 2020, people in communities had already reduced their interest considerably, which might have been because the campaign originated in the United States and European countries, where welfare systems were highly developed. In those contexts, the target groups of the pantries were homeless people or immigrants who did not have access to the social welfare system. In addition, the pantries did not facilitate interpersonal communication, which prevented donors and recipients from knowing each other, resulting in fear of lower social classes. Thai society became a society in which people wanted to help each other but did not help to achieve equality for the poor. It was only temporary help, which did not lead to any long-term solutions. More seriously, if people felt that the existence of the pantries could enable them to live in this kind of community, they would not fight for more important things like universal welfare. The participation of the government in solving problems, such as setting up cameras, arranging staff to guard the pantries, and instituting rules for taking things out of the pantries, led to an additional problem: preventing community learning because people participated as if they were being forced to comply. People became more organised owing to fear but did not learn new behaviours. The

government should instead be involved in other duties, such as making the welfare system more accessible. As for the care of the pantries, this should be left to the community.

The happiness-sharing pantries thus seemed to be another weapon to challenge not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also economic and social disparities in Thai communities.

Conclusion

The community-led food and happiness-sharing initiative in Thailand was a mechanism that charities and local communities ran in response to COVID-19. It started from five model pantries and increased in number, reaching more than 1,400 pantries in Thailand. This campaign worked because of the contributions of charities, local communities, and the government. The existence of the pantries, however, reflected structural problems of social welfare and the social security system in Thailand. Communities faced scrambles for food because of the uncertainty, unfairness, and inequality of the welfare system. Therefore, the campaign seemed to help the needy during the pandemic, but only for a limited period of time, as it did not solve the underlying problems of Thailand's social welfare structures.

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