

Book Review: Chronicles From The Field: The Townsend Thai Project

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*Running since 1997 and continuing today, the Townsend Thai Project has tracked millions of observations about the economic activities of households and institutions in rural and urban Thailand. The project represents one of the most extensive datasets in the developing world. This book offers an account of the design and implementation of this unique panel data survey, explaining the technical details of data collection and survey instruments but emphasizing too the human side of the project. Reviewed by **Joanna Lenihan**.*

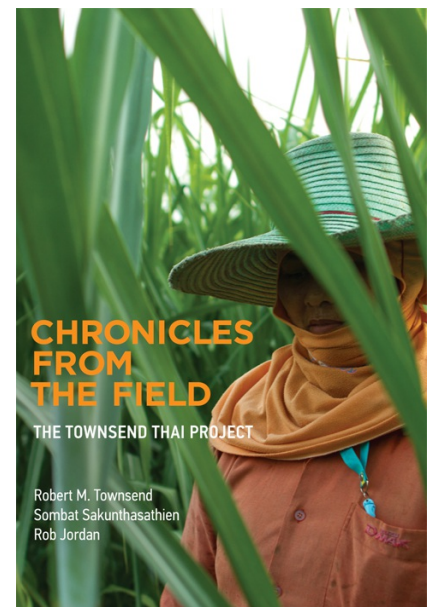
Chronicles From The Field: The Townsend Thai Project. Robert M. Townsend, Sombat Sakunthasathien, Rob Jordan. MIT Press. May 2013.

Find this book:

Chronicles From the Field documents the history and progress of [The Townsend Thai Project](#): the longest running and largest household survey in any developing world, aiming to bridge the wide gap between academic research and policy creation. In the Preface, the authors write that “Many economic and social policies are implemented without the requisite data or appropriate frameworks for analysis, instead, prior convictions, political considerations and the advice of outside experts drive policy making. While well intended, such policies can adversely affect those they seek to help.” This research brings together one of the most detailed and longest running panel datasets in the developing world, offering policy makers and researchers a vivid and valuable insight into the project.

Chronicles From the Field documents this survey from its conception in the mind of Robert Townsend in 1997 right through to its subsequent operation to the current day. The book is a fascinating read from beginning to end, giving a detailed account of the design and implementation of the survey. Interestingly, the reader follows the survey from village to village with profiles of certain employees who played vital parts in the ongoing success of the project.

The survey, and subsequently the book, is the brainchild of [Robert Townsend](#) and [Sombat Sakunthasathien](#); Townsend, an economics professor interested in village economies and how they were affected by issues such as risk and insurance, and Sombat, Director of the Thai Family Research Project and also interested in rural economies but from a banking research perspective. Sombat had previously been conducting a study on how to create a credit program for the areas impoverished hill tribes. Out of their shared interest the Townsend Thai Project was born.



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The reader is taken on a journey through Thailand, starting with the original baseline survey carried out in the Northern regions, eventually evolving to yearly household surveys and monthly surveys to chart the day to day lives of hundreds of Thai households. During this journey through the different Thai regions, the authors profile various workers who have strongly impacted on the research project for different reasons. One such person is Pavisanat “Eu” the boyfriend of Khun Sombat’s daughter who went into the monkhood for a while to gain ‘credit’ for his family. While there, he began along with Sombat’s daughter to devise a completely new operating system for the data collection and cleaning, which helped streamline the data and the timing of the survey. Another worker profiled is Boom, the monthly survey manager who lost an arm in a childhood accident and subsequently found it difficult to find employment until applying for the Townsend Thai Project, where she proceeded to “tidy up” the whole operation and help with the refining of the survey. The book illustrates the importance of employees such as Boom and how they impact on the smooth running of the immense operation.

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Sunday Market in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. Credit: [Siim Teller](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

depth local knowledge is key to the running of the survey. Fieldwork involves relationships beyond just those of the authors. As a way to build trust and reiterate how much the Project values the households, local officials, and others they work with, and to reward the households for their time on extensive surveys, the enumerators give gifts to the families at New Year. The authors describe some of the cultural problems faced when they decided to survey urban centers in Thailand, as well as the rural villages. The survey enumerators were faced with trust issues in these urban centers that were not as easily put to rest as in rural areas, where the village headman could dispel to the villagers any mistrust of the survey. Issues such as this illustrates the importance of being aware of respecting cultural differences when undertaking any research.

Chronicles From the Field is a brilliant read. The human aspect that is more than often missing from economic research books is one of the most important features. The personal way that the book is written takes the reader into the lives of Townsend and Sombat and their unbridled enthusiasm for the research they are carrying out. It takes us through the problems encountered when trying to keep the whole project funded and going forward, while managing the vital aspect of staffing the survey. The books appendix contains an interesting list of research conducted using the Townsend Thai data, which can be used as a tool for readers to see first hand how data can benefit research in economics, climate, geography, policy making, entrepreneurship and risk and insurance.

This book really captures the life and essence behind the longest running and largest household survey in any developing world. While the data gathered by the Townsend Thai Project provides a great deal of invaluable information at village and community level, the book gives us valuable insights on the running of such a project and is written in an honest fashion which will appeal to readers from a wide variety of disciplines, and to both academic and non academic readers alike.

Joanna Lenihan is a final year PhD researcher in University College Cork, Ireland. Her primary research focuses on intentional communities as models for sustainable living and how their knowledge impacts outward into mainstream society. She is currently researching Eco Communities in Ireland. She lectures in Sociology at UCC Social Theory, Culture of Cities, Living Spaces, Social Construction of Habitat, Education, Learning and Work and Sociology of Community. [Read more reviews by Joanna.](#)

