



SHARING KNOWLEDGE IN THAILAND

Brought together by an international volunteer programme, financial experts from Deutsche Bank are supporting rice farmers.

TEXT AND PHOTOS SASCHA ZASTIRAL

On a normal working day, Sven Sievers would be sitting in his office in Hamburg around this time. He would be on a conference call with colleagues or perhaps meeting representatives of his key accounts in his role as an account manager at Deutsche Bank.

Instead, he is sitting in an air-conditioned minibus driving through the province of Ubon Ratchathani in north-eastern Thailand. The view from the window in the early morning light is dominated by the dry and dusty landscape of harvested rice fields. The region, which is situated in the triangle between Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, is one of the country's poorest. The contrast between it and Thailand's ultramodern capital city Bangkok, with its giant shopping centres and skyscrapers, could not be greater: most people in the villages here are rice farmers who live in simple wooden huts. The majority of vehicles on the roads are mopeds or pick-up trucks.

Sven Sievers (55) has short, greying hair and is wearing a black jacket despite the heat. He has all the qualities of a good customer advisor: he is calm, unassuming and has an aura of expertise. He is accompanied by Karolis Verseckas, a 26-year-old analyst from

Lithuania. Verseckas normally works in credit financing for the Spanish market at Deutsche Bank in London. He exudes a youthful enthusiasm when he talks about his specialist area.

Sievers and Verseckas are in Thailand for four weeks to offer advice in a voluntary capacity on a supraregional rice initiative launched at the start of 2015. Here in Ubon Ratchathani, they plan to meet rice farmers and representatives of local authorities.

Just one bad harvest can put livelihoods at risk

The initiative aims to improve the livelihoods of rice farmers. It therefore teaches farmers in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam about topics such as better cultivation methods and marketing opportunities. For most farmers in Thailand, the rice harvest generates less than the country's minimum wage of around EUR 8 per day. Just one bad harvest can easily see them slip below the poverty line.

The supraregional rice initiative is part of the German Food Partnership, which was founded in 2012 under the auspices of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The Partnership consists of German companies and associations wishing to combine their own interests with development objectives. Working with local actors, they are looking to create stable processes in developing countries and emerging economies, from cultivation and process-

ing to trade and consumption. The Partnership is coordinated by GIZ.

The minibus arrives in Mueang Det and stops in front of the municipal rice centre, a state institution which offers advice and support for rice farmers, of which there are thousands throughout Thailand. Mueang Det could also be one of the centres of the supraregional rice initiative, which will offer farmers training in a number of areas in future, including irrigation methods, plant protection, bookkeeping and market theory.

Around three dozen farmers have turned up to talk to Sievers and Verseckas. The proceedings are formal, as is typical in Thailand. The farmers – mostly men in their fifties – are already sitting in four rows when the visitors arrive. Sievers, Verseckas and the GIZ employees take their seats at a long table. The group also includes representatives of the rice wholesaler Olam, a group headquartered in Singapore which could become a partner of the new initiative and buy an agreed quantity of rice from participating farmers.

Sievers stands up, takes the microphone and asks: 'How does financing work here? Where do you get your loans? And do you usually get what you need?' The group speaker answers Sievers' questions on behalf of the farmers. Normally, he explains, farmers borrow money from the agricultural bank or from their cooperative bank. However, he says, the interest on these loans is quite high and the farmers often do not receive the full amount. He hopes to get better access to credit. Sievers nods. »

Theory and practice: Sven Sievers (left) and Karolis Verseckas gain an insight into the work of rice farmers. In the office in Bangkok, they are striving to develop a financing model for farmers.

> INTERVIEW

'Social responsibility'



Suzana Schäfer is corporate volunteering project manager at Deutsche Bank.

Deutsche Bank encourages its employees to take part in volunteer work. Why is that? What does the company gain?

Our social commitment enables us to address pressing social challenges. We place particular emphasis on supporting the personal development of young people and contributing to a fairer education system. By encouraging our employees to take part in social projects, we also strengthen the impact of our initiatives. Almost one quarter of Deutsche Bank employees worldwide demonstrated their social commitment at a personal level last year.

How does Deutsche Bank's international voluntary programme work?

As part of our Corporate Community Partnership Programme, specialists from a wide variety of areas within the bank take part in project placements lasting around four weeks, where they put their expertise to good use in charitable organisations in developing countries and emerging economies. They are released from their normal work on full pay for the duration of the placement and advise groups such as local social enterprises or training establishments. They develop marketing strategies and financing models or evaluate business plans. Our employees learn new skills and broaden their horizons by gaining experience outside their usual work

environment. This also helps to improve identification and satisfaction with Deutsche Bank as an employer.

We therefore strive not only to improve the socio-economic conditions in these countries, but also – and above all – to create a win-win situation at all levels.

What feedback have you received from employees so far?

There has been a very high level of satisfaction on both sides. Employees are motivated by the fact that they can achieve a great deal in a short time. We have noticed that, even after the project has ended, they stay in touch with our partners or members of the social organisations.

Deutsche Bank works with GIZ on its international volunteer programme. Why is that?

GIZ has a direct, local presence in the countries in which our projects are implemented. We therefore know that our employees will receive both the professional and personal support they need during their voluntary placements. We are currently planning a follow-up project for the supranational rice initiative in Thailand, with another team of two specialists set to provide additional support and impetus for the project.

The farmers provide further examples of the difficulties they face. For example, one farmer explains their current problems in accessing markets. He says that more rice is now being produced in the region than distributors are buying. Farmers are therefore often left with surplus produce. To make matters worse, production costs are high: because many young people are leaving the region to work in Bangkok or in other cities, he adds, farmers have to hire additional day labourers. Something has to be done to rekindle young people's interest in agriculture, asserts one man. Another says that he hopes to lower his production costs – which are simply too high – by using machines. Sievers and Verseckas listen attentively.

New approaches to financing

'For me, the meeting showed that there are extremely dedicated people out there who are interested in improving the quality of their products,' says Sievers after meeting the rice farmers. Sievers and Verseckas want to support the farmers' willingness to explore new avenues to improve their livelihoods by devising a financing model specifically for Thai farmers. 'We plan to look at how much rice a farmer produces, what he gets for it, what his costs are, and what he needs to support his household,' explains Sievers. 'We also plan to look at the other side of the coin: the lending options available to farmers, the costs incurred by them, and whether these are appropriate.'

Sievers and Verseckas are in Thailand as part of an international volunteer programme organised and coordinated by GIZ. German companies release their employees for one week to help charitable causes around the world. 'This allows them to gain experience in a sector which is new to them, but still closely related to their day-to-day work,' explains Matthias Bickel, from GIZ in Bangkok. Employees from Deutsche Bank have already

travelled to Myanmar, Uganda and Uzbekistan to participate in the programme.

Immediate interest in the programme

Sievers and Verseckas spend most of their time in Thailand working at the initiative headquarters in the Sukhumvit area of Bangkok. When they are not working out the details of the financing model for farmers, they hold background discussions with experts and representatives of authorities.

At first glance, rice cultivation in Thailand appears to be a big success story. After all, Thailand has been one of the world's largest exporters of rice for decades. 'But when I look at productivity, it seems that many farmers are struggling to earn a living,' says Sievers. The initiative therefore aims to increase yields by around 20 per cent. That may be too ambitious, he adds. 'But you have to aim high to get results.'

Sievers first heard about the volunteer programme through an email sent by his bank's Corporate Social Responsibility department. He wasted no time in registering his interest and was invited for an initial interview soon afterwards. He has been interested in volunteer work for some time: 'I've also offered to mentor younger colleagues. After all, I've been with the bank for 30 years.' His department head supported his decision to take part in the volunteer programme.

Verseckas also jumped at the opportunity when he heard that the programme was looking for volunteers. 'I've worked as a volunteer before and found it very rewarding,' he explains. Because his fiancée is from Thailand, he knew the country well before taking part in the rice initiative. 'I've been here a few times and am aware of the problems facing rice farmers – for example, the fact that young people no longer want to work in the

rice industry.' He was therefore delighted to be accepted into the programme. Education is key, and that is something Verseckas says has become abundantly clear for him during his time in Thailand.

For example, he has learned of individual farmers who have studied and incorporated their knowledge into their business. They are now in a far better financial position than most of their colleagues. 'And that's precisely what the farmers are telling us: show us what we can do, and we'll do it ourselves. They're not asking to be spoon-fed.'

With his typical reserve, Sievers describes his experience so far. 'What we're doing here isn't astrophysics, it's about business expertise. But it also gives me the opportunity to broaden my horizons. And to learn and see things which I can incorporate and use elsewhere in future.' He admits that



Direct dialogue: At the municipal rice centre in Mueang Det, Sievers and Verseckas meet farmers and learn about their plans and problems.

Thailand has been a steep learning curve for him. This is the first time he has worked in the field of agricultural produce. And in a city like Bangkok: 'I always thought that Hamburg was a big city, but since being in Bangkok, I've realised that I actually come from a small village.'

› CONTACT

Sandra Flicke-Lötzsch

› sandra.flicke-loetzsch@giz.de

› AT A GLANCE

Reaping the rewards of volunteer work

The International Corporate Volunteering programme offers employees of companies the opportunity to put their skills to good use for a few weeks in a developing country or emerging economy. GIZ arranges project placements which enable participants to use their expertise and contribute to solving specific local problems. It prepares them for the trip and assigns contacts to support them in the relevant country. For many companies, voluntary placements are an integral part of both their social commitment and their personnel development measures. They also provide an insight into new markets and innovations.

