



Hilltribe Organics (HTO) is a ten-year-old company that launched Thailand’s first organic free-range eggs back in 2014 and continues to be the market leader today. It works exclusively with hill tribes - mainly Akha and Karen women in the Wawee Valley, Chiang Rai, to produce the eggs. HTO works with ~50 egg farmers and supplies them with hen chicks, a hen house, organic feed, before buying all their eggs at a premium price for sale in selected supermarkets and hospitality chains. The inputs for chicken feed are sourced locally from approximately 200 families practicing organic agriculture. The production and commerce that HTO brought into the Wawee Valley has ushered in a kind of prosperity that continues to ripple through the community.

The hens are happy too. They get an average roaming space of 49 square feet, compared to their compatriots in commercial egg farms that get 1-2. As they forage and loosen the soil, it adds to a holistic ecosystem where plants, animals, and human beings can flourish altogether.

Impact Background

The hill tribe areas of Northern Thailand are breathtaking and have been home to the Akha, Karen, and other hill tribes, some for centuries. They are ethnic minority groups who migrated from Laos, China, and Myanmar and came to settle in northern Thailand, several hundred years ago. Because they are neither Thai nor Burmese, they were largely left on their own, living in the highlands of northern Thailand until the 1950’s when depleted forest reserves and poverty, opium cultivation led the Thai government to exert more control and management over them. Their major source of income was growing opium, until it was outlawed in the 1960s. The King’s Royal Project helped the hilltribes switch from opium cultivation to growing cash crops.

IMPACT OVERVIEW

Empowerment of hilltribe communities and regeneration of land through free range egg farming and organic agriculture.

No. of beneficiaries	250 families
% Women	90

COMMUNITY

	Country	Thailand
	Municipalities	Wawee Valley, Chiang Rai
	Communities	Akha and Karen

From that time, they farmed rice and other subsistence crops to sustain themselves, but the altitude and steep slopes where they live make rice farming patchy and challenging. With rice, for example, they often get only one cropping cycle, as opposed to two that farmers in the lowlands get. Understandably, younger generations have been leaving for the cities earlier than they otherwise would in search of a better life.

The Karen are the largest hilltribe group in Thailand, with an estimated population of around 1,000,000. The Karen people are believed to have originated from Tibet, moving south to Myanmar and northern Thailand. The Akha hilltribe originates from Tibet, the majority live in Yunnan province in southwest China. The Akha migrated to Thailand at the beginning of the 20th century and now approximately 80,000 live in Thailand. They have no traditional written language and literacy amongst older generations is very low.

Impact Delivery

HTO seeks to contribute to the community flourishing of the Akha and Karen people mainly through the introduction of free-range egg farming. There are presently 36 farms, each housing ~700 hens. Each farm generates a net income of ~\$400 per month for the farming family, paid daily as freshly laid eggs are transported to the packing station deliberately situated in the community. This roughly doubles a family’s income, in a way that preserves their unique way of life.



Apart from doubling income regularly and consistently, free-range egg farming and the ancillary organic agriculture that accompanies it improve health and quality of life. Now, led by the *women* in the community, younger members of the family get to join in the production, from collecting eggs to herding the hens. Women experience economic empowerment by doing work that isn’t physically demanding while having their children nearby and caring for them. Families are knitted more tightly from the gift of dignified work. Over time, this retains children in the villages and attracts those who have left prematurely back home.

Outcome

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| <i>Improvement of livelihood</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Doubles the income of egg farming families. Provides opportunities to improve health, education, and well-being of families; ▪ Women are economically empowered doing work that isn’t physically demanding, while having their children nearby and caring for them; ▪ Hens are happy – they have ample roaming space to forage, 25 times more than the US free range standard of 2 square feet per hen. |
| <i>Environmental preservation</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Circular ecology becomes a reality because fallow land is used to grow feed and other high value crops through organic agriculture, and chicken manure is composted to improve soil fertility, |

- HTO farmers moved away from unproductive farm projects that took more land and earned them less income; this frees up land for reforestation and wild plants that promote biodiversity.