

She may not court the limelight but she has inspired the educated middle class to respect those worse off as equals, reports **Pravit Rojanaphruk**

# Working for the poor

**V**anida Tantiwithyapitak may not be a household name but this adviser to the Assembly of the Poor has strengthened the rural folk who are fighting for social justice and equality, and encouraged those who are better off to be sympathetic to their struggles.

Born into a middle-class Thai-Chinese family, Vanida was among the student activists of the tumultuous 1970s while she was studying economics at Thammasat University. She became involved in the famous Hara Garment Factory strike when workers seized control of the complex but it was not till the October 1976 backlash and purge of left-leaning students that she and thousands of others had to flee to the jungle and join the Communist Party of Thailand.

In the early 1980s a blanket amnesty was offered to the rebels, and many successfully entered business and politics, but by the early 1990s Vanida's name was to be intertwined with the anti-Pak Mool Dam protest. She was instrumental in helping villagers affected by the dam in their rich fishing zone, which was to be permanently damaged, organise themselves and fight.

Though the hydroelectric dam was completed in 1994, the protesting villagers have managed to win some compensation. Though they failed to stop its construction, they and Vanida were able to highlight the issue of mega-development projects and their adverse impact at the national and, to some extent, international level.

"The natural resources belong to the villagers as well as to the state. The villagers have the right to protect their environment and scrutinise whatever the state is doing to it. Not just a small minority, but even one person has the right," Vanida told *The Nation* in December 1993.

Thai society is traditionally hierarchical, and the voice of the less-educated rural poor is often neglected, but Vanida doesn't just approach the villagers and tell them what they ought to do. Her role as adviser to the Assembly of the Poor, founded a decade back, involves added responsibilities because this is a conglomeration of thousands of mostly

rural folk who are affected by dozens of state-endorsed development projects. They are aware that the decision-making process does not flow from top to bottom but is participatory, democratic and often tedious.

"The question is whether these villagers are as worthy, as human beings, as everyone else. Why must they make sacrifices? What do they sacrifice?" she once told *The Nation*. So instead of looking for help from the middle class and the elite, Vanida inspired the poor to be masters of their own destiny. "Villagers are fighting on the ground for their rights as human beings. They understand that it's a right they deserve. They have become the captains of their own ships, and nobody can dictate to them any longer," Vanida added.

"She helps villagers to live in confidence and has made their problems a public issue," said Thanaphol Euwsakul, editor of *Fah Diew Kan*, an alternative political and social magazine. He added that Vanida exemplified the spirit of equality and although the Assembly of the Poor has been rather quiet for the past five years since Thaksin Shinawatra came to power, there's no denying that it has indeed managed to influence the ruling Thai Rak Thai policy towards the rural electorate, especially the poor.

For this Thanaphol gave credit to Vanida and the Assembly. "When it comes to policy for the rural electorate, no party had ever offered so much as the Thaksin administration," he said, adding a caveat: "Whether or not this kind of populist policy helps the poor in the long run is another matter."

Through the decade Vanida spent with them, these people were encouraged to become literate and worldly. The Assembly sets up political schools where villagers learn about the inherent bias of the mass media that often disregard affairs of the rural poor. They also learn about the problems of the Thai political system and more.

The very mention of her name is synonymous with total dedication to social justice and empathy, and continues to invoke the respect of those who lack money or a formal education. ■

