



# Yunus Center at AIT



## Media Brief



**AIT**  
Asian Institute of Technology



# Yunus Center at AIT

## Rationale

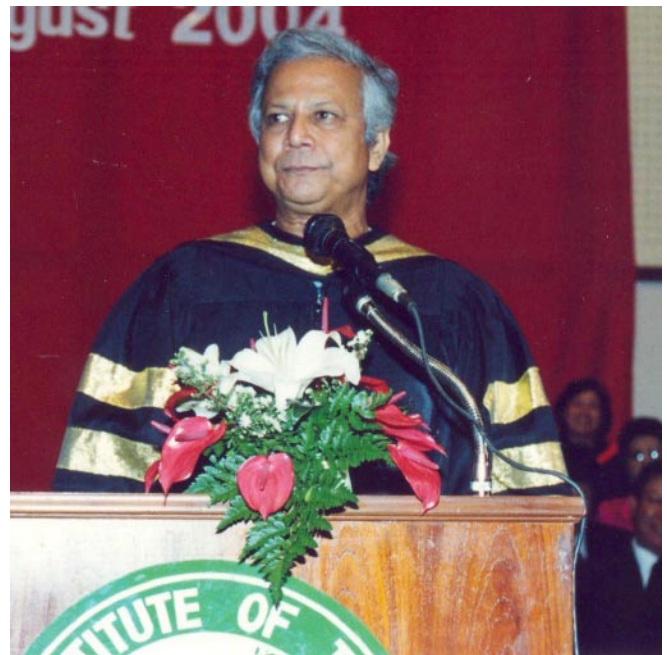
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In 2004, about 1.9 billion people, or 60 per cent of developing Asia's population, lived on an average of less than US\$ 2 a day (ADB, 2004).

The number of people living in extreme poverty totaled about 690 million or 21.5% of developing Asia's population, if the one dollar-a-day poverty line is used. Seventy-five per cent of the world's poorest people - 800 million women, children, and men live in rural areas (IFAD, 2006). Women have shouldered the brunt of poverty. Women constitute 70% of the world's extreme poor and own only 1% of the world's titled land.

Poverty and food security are directly linked, especially in the developing countries of Asia. One direct measure that can be taken to alleviate poverty is therefore to increase capacity for food production, processing, and distribution. Modern science has been a powerful stimulus to agricultural transformation and economic growth. Through

improved technologies, it has been possible to increase food availability per person by almost 20% since the early 1960s. Although the Green revolution has contributed significantly to greater food production and poverty alleviation, the yield potential of the Green Revolution has apparently been exhausted and vast disparities remain or have been generated. Given the urgency of averting hunger, new appropriate applications of modern science to food and agriculture security need to be initiated and sustained. Technological development must also go hand in hand with an understanding of socio-economic contexts, including barriers and discriminations, which exacerbate poverty and food insecurity and hamper empowerment.



## Objective

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The objective of the Yunus Center at AIT is to contribute to poverty alleviation by enabling rural people to handle and be in control of improving their own farming and agriculture related business. All activities at the Center shall follow the objective of poverty reduction and sustainability with a focus on agriculture and food security issues, encompassing a variety of disciplines and facilitating interdisciplinary work in such areas as production of food, food processing, logistics, economic factors of consumption choices in the society, the use of food for energy as well as nutritional value of food, land ownership, soil quality, water use, subsidies, credit, market stability, market speculation, wholesale and retail distribution systems and insurance.



## Why Establish the Yunus Center at AIT?

**A**IT's mission is to assist the region towards sustainable development, and its teaching, research and outreach activities are constantly geared towards this goal. By pursuing this mission for five decades, AIT has developed a unique combination of strengths that are important to bring together to support the envisioned mission and operation of this center.

AIT is an autonomous, politically neutral organization with a strong reputation. It is able to bring together people and organizations from different sectors of society and with different political agendas. This, combined with our reputation, network of alumni and geographic location enables AIT to bring people together for dialogue and to build alliances. As a concrete example, AIT was recently endorsed by the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon as the site of the official ASEAN Center of Excellence on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

AIT is also engaged in a number of other initiatives to develop its focus on poverty reduction such as the professional bachelors degree program in Poverty Reduction and Agriculture Management (PRAM), in collaboration with regional and local-level partners in the Wetlands Alliance Program. The PRAM targets mid-career district extension officers in Laos and aims to equip them with key competencies for poverty reduction. It is for people who have professional experience and cannot leave their workplace for extended periods of time. It places a high emphasis on the value of local knowledge and on ways of combining it with agricultural science to address poverty reduction. The program makes an innovative use of the concept of "fitness for purpose" by measuring the program quality in terms of direct tangible impacts on poverty.

The PRAM model of education for poverty reduction has attracted interest from other countries in the region. For example, discussions between AIT and the National Academy of Science and Technology in the Philippines have resulted in the University of the Philippines embarking on development of an educational program similar to the PRAM. The program in Bioresources Management and Productivity Systems aims to impact poverty among the indigenous population in some of the poorest areas of the country.



AIT will also be home to the new Asian Center for Corporate Social Responsibility (ACCSR), which is a joint venture partnership between the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) and CSR Asia. Headquartered in Hong Kong, CSR Asia is the most authoritative voice on Corporate Social Responsibility in Asia.



Because of AIT's geographic, institutional and political position, it is able to link global, regional, and community agendas. Our faculty, staff and students have the opportunity to move seamlessly from global forums to community meetings. AIT has come to realize that many of the world's experts on poverty reduction are not in academic institutions, but live and work in rural communities. Through our network of partnerships we can act as a bridge to help mobilize, facilitate, and give a greater voice to these local experts.



AIT's academic excellence covering a good balance of engineering, social science, and management, combined with our nimble organizational and policy structure enables us to move into new interdisciplinary areas and respond to emergent needs much more rapidly than more traditional universities. This gives us the needed flexibility and capacity to address the complex and inter-linked dimensions of poverty.



With AIT's focus on development of the region and poverty alleviation, we share the aspiration of the Grameen family. We believe that AIT is in a unique position to pursue the objectives put forth and that in partnership with the Grameen family we will have a critical mass of capacity for an important new regional initiative for poverty reduction.

## Goals

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- Address issues of poverty reduction through food security.
- Encourage gender-sensitive research on poverty reduction and food security.
- Serve to encourage funding and conduct of research that has an impact on poor people's lives.
- Pioneer, incubate, and disseminate models of social business in rural agriculture and related areas.
- Explore and develop uses of ICT in rural agriculture and related areas.
- Serve as an intellectual think tank and regional repository of global effort on good governance and management of non-conventional poverty alleviation projects.

## Activities

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**S**ustainability and poverty alleviation are mainly put forward by practice. The thrust of the Yunus Center's mission therefore must be built on its own action-based research and practice which complements, applies and extends the teaching of textbook knowledge. The Center will provide an independent and open platform for addressing issues in food security in a way that has a direct impact on poor people's lives. It will act as an incubator for new social business plans that challenge conventional academic wisdom; it will facilitate generation of community-based knowledge; and it will promote opportunities for both women and men.

The Yunus Center will mainly host temporary resident researchers not full time employees. The Center will invite fellows for a short term and give them the resources and independence to pursue unconventional ideas. This can be an opportunity for faculty members of AIT and other universities to realize their own ideas for one or two semesters, or for a Master's or PhD or post doctoral student to follow up in practice with ideas and business plans that they have developed in the study programs without having to fully leave the university. The Center will also invite social entrepreneurs as fellows who have demonstrated expertise in or established successful examples of social businesses to pursue further studies and degree programs at AIT such as the professional doctorate. Many high-potential social business entrepreneurs have neither the formal qualifications, nor the time to undertake traditional business studies courses. No formal degree is therefore necessary to participate in the activities of the Yunus Center.





## Social Business

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The Center will support experimentation with sustainable social business enterprises and practices, and how to enhance their beneficial effects on local communities. In this way, the center will respond to the real needs of poor people in the region by supporting social business entrepreneurs, and maximizing the beneficial effects of their activities on their local communities; and by educating all our students about the important role of social business entrepreneurs in the positive development of the region. Social businesses are a promising means for putting women at the center of rural development. The Center will support work to understand how social business practices can improve women's food security and social status equally with those of men, while improving development outcomes. Concrete impact will be realized by establishing an Incubator for Social Business Entrepreneurs within the Center to foster locally embedded social business initiatives. This can come in the form of seed capital and material resources but also in form of complementary managerial advice. The incubator will involve all three schools at AIT, as well as regional stakeholders with an interest in business solutions to poverty.

Many institutions around the world are starting to involve students and faculty in social business studies. The Yunus Center can provide a regional headquarters for international partners in the academia and international organization. AIT is well positioned to service poor regions in developing countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Bangladesh, and travel to or from places that would most benefit from social business ventures is convenient and relatively cheap.

The activities of the Yunus Center will feed naturally and directly into all teaching and learning activities at AIT's Schools. From the action research integral to the support of social business ventures, case studies will be developed and adopted into the mainstream teaching of sustainability to PhD and Master Students at the schools; and faculty will be able to report first hand about ongoing social business ventures, and how they are impacting upon local poverty.

## Developing alliances and forums for poverty focused action

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- Give poor people a voice by building on the idea of linking local, regional and global agendas. The Center will develop regional forums for poor communities to interact with regional agencies (e.g. FAO, ADB, MRC) in a more effective and direct way.
- Develop panels of experts in poverty reduction and food security, which would encompass broad cross-sections of society for specific focal areas within the region.
- Develop local institutional partnerships for the development of gender-sensitive research tools and generate gender-responsive research outputs on food security and poverty reduction.
- Develop new regional education and training courses for poverty alleviation in partnership with AIT's network of national educational institutions. This will include developing school curricula for poor areas and learning resources for poor communities.
- Develop alliances between local academic institutions that offer agricultural educational services for poverty reduction and rural development. As part of the Yunus Center activities, AIT will take-up a major challenge for the development of agricultural education in the 21st century and work with local colleges and universities to transform agricultural education institutions into dynamic promoters of change for poverty reduction. AIT can assist these institutions to abandon long-established traditions of academic isolation and become active contributors to sustainable agricultural and rural development through innovative teaching, research and extension.
- Function to promote research that has an impact on poor people's lives. This will work with partners to develop standards and guidelines to define and measure the impact of agricultural research and research funding on poverty alleviation. This would then lead to a certification mechanism whereby researchers and funding agencies could seek Yunus Center certification that their research conforms to good practice in poverty alleviation, including that it is ethical and responds to local need as defined by those populations, and that it addresses the increasing gap between men and women in terms poverty and food insecurity. In addition, examples of good practice would be sought and case studies would be written in order to communicate the lessons learned. A collection of awards would be created in order to help raise awareness of these issues, to disseminate the standards, and to promote the careers of researchers who have the potential to lead progress in this area and inspire others through their example.





## Information Dissemination through ICT

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**A**griculture is knowledge intensive so that ICT holds promise in providing important gains in productivity while facilitating market access and price information. But agriculture has lagged far behind other fields in realizing the benefits of ICT. In the medical practice, for example, any physician with access to the Internet can consult a wealth of well-organized information on the latest results concerning any medical condition. So the power of the global information on medicine can be brought to bear on the treatment of any individual patient anywhere at any time – this has revolutionized medical practice. This is the kind of power we would like to harness for application in rural agriculture. The time is ripe for this with the emergence of extremely powerful and easily configurable mobile computing devices like the iPhone and with the ability to establish high capacity wireless networking at low cost. What is lacking now is the focus and resolve to establish a system to rival that available in the medical field.



## Financial Issues

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**A**n endowment fund will be established to provide stability in funding the activities of the center. Funding for the endowment and for activities will be sought from government agencies, international organizations, and the private sector.



## Organization and Governance

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**T**he day-to-day activities will be run by a Director and Secretariat. Permanent staff will be kept to a minimum in order to provide maximum agility for the Center to address changing needs.

Modalities for participation of representatives from poor and marginalized communities in the region will also be incorporated into the governance structure.



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