

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS
IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND

บทบาทขององค์กรพัฒนาเอกชนในการพัฒนาสังคมไทย

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ABSTRACT

Thailand has recently achieved remarkable economic development. However, it has brought about serious problems such as pollution, and income distribution. Among these problems, the widening of income gap between urban area and rural area has become the most serious one.

From the early 1980s, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have earnestly begun to tackle these problems. Especially as for rural development, they have realized the importance of farmers' participation, appreciating their potential, their power, their initiative and experiences. "The answer lies in villages" has become their motto.

Therefore, the strategy of rural development which NGOs are advocating is not an abstract one but concrete one based upon experiences of farmers. "The agriculture for family consumption, not for marketing" is one of strategy motto they advocated.

บทคัดย่อ

แม้ว่าประเทศไทยจะประสบผลสำเร็จในการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจในระยะหลัง ๆ นี้เป็นอย่างมาก แต่ในขณะเดียวกันความสำเร็จนั้นได้ก่อให้เกิดผลกระทบหลายประการ เช่น ปัญหามลภาวะที่เกิดขึ้นกับภาวะแวดล้อม และปัญหาการกระจายรายได้ของประชาชน ซึ่งความแตกต่างระหว่างรายได้ของประชาชนในเขตเมืองและเขตชนบทได้กลายเป็นปัญหาที่สำคัญที่สุด ดังนั้น ในต้นทศวรรษ พ.ศ. 2523-2532 องค์กรพัฒนาเอกชนจึงได้เข้ามาดำเนินการแก้ไขอย่างจริงจัง โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในการพัฒนาชนบท โดยได้ทำให้ชาวชนบทตระหนักในความสำคัญของการมีส่วนร่วมในการพัฒนาท้องถิ่น มีความเชื่อมั่นในความสามารถ ความคิดริเริ่มสร้างสรรค์และประสบการณ์ของตนเอง จนกระทั่งประโยคที่ว่า “คำตอบอยู่ในหมู่บ้าน” ได้กลายเป็นคติประจำใจของเขาเหล่านั้น กลยุทธ์ในการสนับสนุนการพัฒนาชนบทมิใช่เป็นเพียงนามธรรม แต่ได้พยายามณรงค์และโน้มน้าวให้เกษตรกรทำการเกษตร “เพื่อการบริโภคในครอบครัวมิใช่เพื่อการตลาด” อันจะทำให้ชีวิตความเป็นอยู่ของเกษตรกรดีขึ้น โดยไม่ต้องขายที่นาของตนเองเพื่อนำเงินมาใช้จ่ายอย่างฟุ่มเฟือย หรืออพยพเข้ามาหางานทำในเขตเมือง

INTRODUCTION

The economic boom has brought about serious social and environmental problems: pollution in the urban environs and impoverishment in rural area, to name the most obvious. The government has recognized those problems and has taken measures to improve the situation, but these alone have proven to be inadequate, especially in rural area.

In the social and economic rural development process, the need for the local people's participation has been emphasized for a long time, but the manner and form of that involvement remained unresolved. The activities of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), especially since the 1980s, have been energetically oriented towards the socio-economic development of rural area. In these impoverished zones, social problems and economic problems are inseparable, and therefore the NGO's development strategy must, of necessity, be a comprehensive one.

This study focuses on the problems of total community development, especially that of the Northeast; this is because it is known as the most underdeveloped region of the country, where many NGOs have been and continue to be active.

METHODS

Data were collected from the NGOs local offices on their activities. Moreover, research materials and periodicals published by NGOs were collected including observation on and interview of local villagers in the project area.

Features of Past Community Development Policies

The policy of community development started in the early 1960s when the first National Economic and Social Development Plan was implemented and has been continued since then. The features of the community development plan at that time, however, was somewhat complex, involving anti-communist policy concurrent with development policy. The policy focus was to improve the basic needs of people who lived in remote area.

Most symbolic of these policies was the creation of the Mobile Units in the Northeast Development Plan. It is quite natural that this policy should have the features of so called “from up to down development” without the local people's participation; in other words, people were always “people to be given”.

The progress of economic development and the increasing income gap between urban and rural area necessitated consideration of the community development strategy; this required “people's participation” in the development process.

The income gap between the urban and rural communities became wider and wider with the accelerated economic growth after entering the 1980s especially towards the end of the decade. The government considered that the economic discrepancy must be solved by the decentralization of industries away from Bangkok area. However, in practice, this has been difficult to achieve: the negative effects of the economic development have been found most clearly in rural area.

As a result of the factors stated above, it has become evident that government policy has not been effective enough in achieving adequate rural development because the government can not help but promoting capitalism in rural area.

This is the reason why the activities of NGOs have recently attracted public attention: their activities have concentrated first on uncovering the needs and identifying the potentiality of the local people and communities, then endeavoring to fully realize that potentiality. It was thus admitted in the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan, which started on September 30, 1991 that the role of NGOs is indispensable to rural community development. This article does not intend to describe and analyze the activities of each NGO; rather it aims to clarify direction and implication of their community development strategies.

With the rapid economic growth, agriculture and rural communities have undergone remarkable changes in recent decades. The most remarkable change has taken place in land prices. The price of farmland in remote area has soared, whereas previously it was negligible. This is partly due to land demand for industrial use and resort development, or due to speculation. Many farmers, who have never experienced such high price of land were surprised and delighted, consequently they readily sold their land to buyers.

This phenomenon had a close connection with the economic boom in rural area beginning in the late 1980s, but at the same time it became one of the basic reason which gave birth to landless farmers, compelling them to move to work in urban area.

The economic gap between urban and rural communities has widened. The income level of urban people has increased as a result of the economic growth, but most farmers are missing out. This is because the price levels of agricultural commodities have not been favourable, while the cost of outlays such as fertilizer and pesticide has increased, thus widening the income gap between the two groups of people. This has become another reason compelling rural people to migrate into urban area.

The migration of labor forces from rural to urban area, or to foreign countries has increased. Farm management is apt to be left to the old and very young, or almost all of villagers go away to work after harvest, resulting in very sparsely populated villages.

Another factor that is causing the situation to further deteriorate is the fact that the natural resources for agricultural production such as land, forest, and water have been decreasing in a remarkable speed : this has become a bone of contention between peoples; farmers versus farmers, and farmers versus business prospectors.

Finally, it must be pointed out that in Thailand, peasants whose cultivated land is limited to family labor force, have played an important role in agricultural production for a long time. In some places, this production system has been drastically affected by the introduction of capitalism. Farms managed by big companies, have appeared in some places employing the very farmers who lost their own farmland. This form of agriculture management may be more efficient in pursuing profit, but from the viewpoint of national economic security in the future, it may create a vulnerable situation.

ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

NGOs in Thailand have made efforts in community development work since the 1980s. Their activities have been concentrated in the Northeast region where the productivity of agriculture is low, suffering from drought and the middlemen who control the rural economy.

Mr. Anek Nakabutr analyzed that the role of NGO activities have changed according to the periods.²

1. The first period (1981-1984) : The policy of developing “Rural Poverty” in the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan encouraged the increase of foreign assistance to NGOs in Thailand, thus inducing the establishment of NGOs. The main activity of NGOs in the rural area is to realize the potentiality of people by developing “Human Beings”, which means training of leaders in rural area, including officials, group leaders, intellectuals, youths and technicians.

At the same time, the setting up of rural organizations such as “the Rice Bank”, “the Buffalo Bank”, “Cooperatives Shop” were promoted by NGOs in order to solve various rural problems. Another NGO target is the improvement of the quality of rural life. At this stage, “The answer lies in the village” became motto for NGOs.

2. The second period (1984-1987) : This is the period when the price of rice continuously declined, concurrently with a prolonged drought. The debts increased, and as a result, farmers who lost land emigrated to urban area.

NGOs then began the campaign to find “An alternative development strategy”.

The activities of NGOs include :

- a. Promotion of integrated farming
- b. A campaign to quit “Vicious habits”
- c. Organization of teachers
- d. Study of culture and history
- e. Study of “Wisdom of farmers”
- f. Study of herbs and rediscovery of medical care of old days
- g. The establishment of a village fund in each location

3. The third period (1987-1989) : During this period the high rate of 9-10 percent economic growth had begun, especially those of export-oriented industries, tourism and regional based industries, which were remarkably high. The invasion of foreign capital, especially from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea to the regions complicated and accelerated. This had such a great impact on the regions as fishermen in the South region lost their small scale fishery bases to the cultivation of prawns, causing the mangroves to vanish: this caused serious environment problems. Buying up the land for the purpose of developing resorts is another serious problem. Large tracts of land at Samui Island, Phuket Island, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lamphun were bought up, increasing thus landless farmers.

NGOs have begun to support the farmers' struggle for land which has naturally lead to policy disputes and political struggle between NGOs and the government. In that sense, the activities of NGOs have gradually changed and become more political in substance than being merely socio-economic.

The philosophy and activities of NGOs as they relate to economic and social development has changed from time to time. However, the essential attitude of NGOs for development works is based in the realities of rural area. In that sense, their strategies of development seem to be expressed in their motto “The answer lies in the village”. What answer they have gleaned from villages, is the next issue to describe in this article.

Phuyai (Village Headman) Phai and the Development of Sakoon Village

Sakoon Village³ is located in Buriram Province in the Northeast of Thailand. Phuyai Phai was born in 1930. Although he has already retired from the post of village headman, he is still respected by the villagers. He is called “Phuyai”, and is regarded as an ideal leader of the community development by the people working in NGOs. He entered the priesthood at the age of 16, and continued to study Buddhist teaching for nine years. After resigned from the priesthood, he was elected to the village headman at the age of 35 (1965) and began to tackle the work of developing the village.

His first job was to play a leading role on improving way of life, by helping villagers to cooperate in the community work. Development of the community began with the construction of roads, a school, waterwork and toilets. This development work was very common in other villages. But in the case of Sakoon, it was peculiar in the sense that they cooperated themselves in working with little help from the government. They began and the outside help followed. The basic needs for daily life had been almost completed by 1983.

The next problem he tackled was to exploit the public land, in which he had to confront directly the forest policy of the government. He dared to do this with his own logic and political power, and succeeded in cultivating a mulberry field in order to increase farmers' employment and income. At the same time, he started to tackle an integrated agriculture. The first step was construction of ponds on the bank of which fruit trees and vegetables were grown, and livestock such as pigs and buffalos were raised. Fishes were bred in order to circulate wasted matters from livestock.

He devoted himself to action first, and then advised other villagers to follow suit. The essence of an integrated agriculture is to change farming from merely “for marketing” to “farming in order to feed family”, by which the economic condition of farmers is assured of being stable.

As a means of uniting people for one purpose, he tried to restore the local tradition. He introduced this strategy as a means of accumulating capital.

The case of Sakoon is now considered a model of success in rural development and

many visitors are coming to observe his work, including those from foreign countries. Needless to say, many visitors are from NGOs. The main reason Sakoon succeeded in realizing the potentiality of villagers is to have “Phuyai Phai”, a good leader, who advocated the principle, “to depend upon ourselves first, not depend upon others”, and “help each other”

“Chief Priest Nan” and Buddhist Teaching⁵

“Chief Priest Nan” is noted in another setting. He is a famous priest called a Priest Developer, a leader of community development, living in Surin Province in the Northeast. His devoted efforts for development work as a priest have been rather unique.

Priest Nan was born at Thasawan Village in Surin Province. He entered the priesthood at the age of 20, then he became the chief priest of Samakky Temple. It goes without saying that the direct motive for engaging in the development was that he faced the poverty of villagers. But there was another thought behind it, that was, “the priests are indebt to villagers”.

“The priests do not need to rent a house, nor to buy rice : they have nothing to be bothered about. Their only obligation is to practise the Buddhist way of life. They are indebt to villagers. Villagers must work hard. They have families, wives and children to support”.

“We are indebt to villagers in the sense that they offer food to us from their limited supply; we must return good to them”. “Villagers are suffering from poverty. Is it the duty of priests to persuade them to do good things, to be moral?” This was the question that made him a leader of community development.

The first development task was the construction of the road to the town. The priests and the shamans of the temple began to work with hand tools: this leads to the participation of villagers. The road made villagers’ life comfortable, but it never improved their life. Priest Nan groped for a new way to solve problems and found it by applying meditation of the priests. The meditation of the priest consists of two steps, the first of which is “Samathi” and the second is “Wipasana”. In the first step of meditation called “Samathi”, people could be free from various desires, and only in that condition, they can attain wisdom, called “Wipasana” by which people see themselves, their own sufferings, the cause of poverty, and the cause of sufferings.

Their poverty is caused partly by the weather or natural environment, such as irregular rainfall and partly by economic problems, such as low price of rice, high rate of interest and partly by vicious habits, namely drinking, gambling and playing around. The meditation training advocated by Priest Nan had a good public response: many villagers in the neighboring villages wanted to join. As a result of this training, many villagers became free from their vicious habits: they enjoyed a peaceful mind as well as the spirit of cooperation.

The next concrete task of development was to engage in cooperative buying of fertilizer, using a temple fund. But they could not solve the problem of poverty. So they decided to establish a kind of “Rice Bank” called “Sahaban Khao” (maintaining a supply of rice cooperatively) in order to cut off causes of poverty. Except for the training of meditation by Priest Nan, this project, the spirit of which was “the rich must help the poor”, has never succeeded.

NGOs of Surin Province offered assistance in this project: it prevailed to the region in a short time, and the project succeeded in decreasing the number of indebted farmers.

Now, priests who agreed with the concept of Priest Nan established the “Saha Thamma for Development” (Union of Buddhist Teaching), which has been leading the community development in spiritual educational training program.

Agro-forestry

The agro-forestry⁴ strategy of which Phuyai Viboon is an important advocator, is another model of rural development which the NGOs are supporting. He was born in Chachoengsao Province in 1936. His father had a shop selling herb medicine. After changing his occupation many times, he returned to his village and began farming. He grew cassava in addition to rice. However, knowing that the more he grew deeper into debt he sank, he sold out all farmland (except the 9 rai of rice fields) in order to clear his debts: then he changed his farming policy and practice. He also advocated “agriculture for family consumption” rather than “agriculture for marketing” resulting from the experience of indebtedness caused by growing cash crops.

The “agro-forestry” by which his farming style is called has the following features:

1. We should cultivate 2 or 3 rai of rice fields enough to live on.

2. We should grow various perennial fruit trees in small number.
3. We should grow many kinds of edible herbs as far as possible.
4. We should grow quick-growing trees as a provision for the old age.
5. Natural agriculture should be aimed at combining natural vegetables, herbs, poultry and livestock in the forest area.

Kiriwong Village

Kiriwong Village¹ is a small village surrounded by the Kao Luang mountains in Nakorn Si Thammarat Province in the southern region. The products of the village are various fruit, such as durian and mangosteen.

Before the 1960s, people lived and traded using barter system with neighboring villages. Owing to the remote location of the village, the villages were less involved in a cash economy until comparatively recently. However, with the rapid economic development, they have recently begun to be involved in it, causing them to fall into debt. What made this village famous was that they succeeded in restoring their village under excellent leaders: cooperative saving totalled as much as 10 million baht, even though they were damaged by disastrous flood.

The village economy is based in managing fruits gardens. They like to grow local varieties of fruits, using the natural agriculture method. Although the yields of new varieties is high, they have never changed the local varieties to the new ones in sudden change, because of weakness to diseases.

A labor-intensive method without using fertilizer has been adopted. The stratification of villagers has not been very serious, but several disastrous floods and unfair trading of products by the outsiders have brought about the increase in local farmers' indebtedness. At the beginning of the 1980s the saving cooperatives called "Krum Sacha" was organized by village leaders.

Originally, the saving group numbered 51 members with a combined saving total of only 30,000 baht, but they have made remarkable progress as in 1988, when the number of members had increased to 1,700 with the savings amount of ten million baht.

The expansion of the saving group made it possible to establish cooperatives shops which provide cheaper everyday goods to villagers as well as mutual benefits in cases of illness or death. The villagers have to take full responsibility for the management of these organizations, all of which could be said to be a process for villagers to study villagers.

It is emphasized that the success of Kiriwong Village is attributed to two important factors, firstly, the self-help spirit of villagers and secondly, the fact that they have had good leaders in the village. NGOs, which have surveyed the village, concluded that the energy of development came from making use of villagers' wisdom and experience, and resources of the community to thus realize their collective potentiality.

The General Features of NGOs' Strategy

The Development of Human Beings

The importance of peoples participation in community development has long been emphasized. The activities of NGOs in the 1980s has challenged this theme. It began with the setting up of organizations in the community to which people could join. The government has also done this. It can be said that the task of setting up these organizations is a kind of study process of for NGOs. Efforts to promote the spirit of self-help in communities has been tried in many places.

What NGOs have studied first is whether the community has within itself potentiality for development. Then the question is how this can be realized?

In this process of study, NGOs have also realized the importance of developing human beings before setting up organizations for community development in which people participate. Otherwise, without suitable people, organizations can not work properly. Various methods of developing human beings have been tried in villages. In order to develop villagers, however, good leaders are indispensable. It may be priests in some cases, village headmen in others. Anyway, good leaders must be persons to whom people pay respect. They must have a spirit of sacrificing themselves for the community, or for the whole. They must also have a charismatic personality as well as be a man of virtue.

It should be noted that to develop human beings does not mean to train persons merely to acquire knowledge or technique, but it means to train persons to be people of virtue. More specifically, it means first to require them to quit vicious habits, such as drinking, gambling and playing around.

The more impoverished the rural area becomes, the more vicious habits tend to prevail in it. So far as vicious habits prevail in a community, it is almost impossible to develop it. Therefore, to cut down the level of vicious circle activities is a prerequisite for the development of any community.

Self-help and Mutual Cooperation

Next to the developing of human beings, self-help and mutual cooperation in daily life are emphasized. The spirit of self-help has often been emphasized in Thailand so far : An example of this is the spirit of the cooperatives movement. However, there has been a great difference between self-help as a motto, propagated by the upper organizations and that of its practice by those who must help themselves.

The Realization of Potentiality

The potentiality of any village consists of the human factors combined with that of nature. To realize potentiality, the power and the network of organizations must be utilized. Speaking more concretely, they have implemented the following activities and obtained satisfactory results.

a. To Organize Saving Groups

They have established saving groups which constantly save small amounts of money once a month. If a large number of members continue to save for a long time, it will become a fair amount of money and they can lend money to those villagers who used to borrow money from merchants at a high interest rate, as well as to invest in some cooperative activities.

What make this possible is the money saved by refraining to use it for vicious habits. In that sense, it might be said that this is a direct result from “developing human beings”

The government has tried in vain to foster this kind of saving in some villages : in those cases, there was no organization supported by the local villagers.

The term “saving group” has two meanings. There is the spiritual one, that is to say, people regularly save a small amount of money which they determine within themselves; the second is a practical one, that is to say, to accumulate money in preparation for necessity. If it amounts to a large sum of money, it would become the capital which is large enough to be invested. NGOs are assisting the training of keeping accounts, or coordinating with the upper organizations.

b. Rice Bank

This prevents villagers from borrowing rice from outsiders at a high rate of interest, which results in deep indebtedness and eventually the loss of their farmland. This is also one form of mutual cooperation. The villagers usually take the occasion of traditional ceremonies such as Mahachat, Thodkathin to set up rice banks: this may be said to be a form of realizing the power of mutual cooperation. NGOs are extending assistance in building storehouses, or helping in the initial stage of storing paddy.

c. Cooperatives Shop

Cooperatives shops safeguard villagers from excess profits taken by merchants by providing villagers with daily necessities at a suitable price. The management of these shops gives villagers a good chance to think about the matter of their livelihood. NGOs are extending assistance in storing goods and keeping books.

d. Making Efficient Use of the Unemployed

The setting up of buffalo banks (cattle banks) or the restoration of traditional handicraft, aims at making efficient use of unemployed labor forces in villages. The members of a buffalo bank who raise a breeding pair of buffalo (or cattle) will get a calf as a reward, or their labor cost in the former. The restoration of the traditional handicraft aims at making use of female or children workers. In some cases, NGOs are giving assistance in providing the

initial financial outlay or technique to them. In the case of handicraft, NGOs help them sell their products.

As stated above, the basic viewpoint of NGOs on agricultural development is that the more involved in a monetary economy the farmers become, the greater will be their debt, so that they become poor and eventually lose their farmland. In order to survive and not to be involved in a money economy, they insist in changing their farming from “the agriculture for marketing” to “the agriculture for family consumption or self-sufficiently”.

For the self-sufficient agriculture, it is desirable to change the villagers’ agriculture to one where they can decrease their cash outlays as much as possible. In that sense, NGOs advocate “an integrated agriculture” or “a natural agriculture” or “an agro-forestry”. This is a noteworthy process which began in the Northeast and seems to have deep implication, although the movement have not prevailed throughout the country yet.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to develop rural community, NGOs consider the following processes as indispensable.

1. To set up community organizations
2. To develop human beings
3. To foster the spirit of self-help and mutual cooperation
4. To make full use of the potentiality of a community
5. To encourage self-reliance of life by new farming

Although this development strategy advocated mainly in the Northeast region has not prevailed throughout the country yet, its meaning and implication seem to be profound.

The interesting problem is that the farming advocated by NGOs is oriented toward that of labor intensive rather than extensive. Agriculture in Thailand which has been extensively developed by exploiting land is already difficult to maintain under the condition of diminishing land. This fact may lead somewhat to the change of social structure in the future.

It is worth noting that to what extent the policies advocated by NGOs will gain the sympathy of people who are living in underdeveloped area in the age of high economic development. This movement calls for a new value system in which the monetary income is not regarded as an important matter, but the physical consumption and peaceful mind are regarded as important.

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