Strengthening relations between indigenous communities and the State: the experience of a Learning Route in Northern Thailand

Impact series
ROUTASIA PROGRAMME
NOVEMBER 2013

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ABSTRACT. In the story of the changing relationships between the Government and the indigenous communities of the northern uplands of Thailand, the case of the Karen village of Huay Hin Lad Nai represents a peak of excellence, combining the management of natural resources and a remarkable form of organising and transferring customary knowledge. The Innovation Plan Community food crops and herbal farms for self-reliance, which emerged from the Learning Route organised jointly by IFAD, the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact in November 2012, represents a milestone in the establishment of a successful and pioneer partnership within Indigenous Communities and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives of Thailand. More interesting is that the starting point is the recognition of local knowledge and local champions as fundamental for livelihood improvement that was jointly realized during the Learning Route.

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Introduction

As in most of the APR, the relationships between the Government of Thailand and their indigenous peoples have been a story of tensions. Even if the Thai State was never colonized, its borders were defined by the independence of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar: so, for instance, each of the nine so-called hill tribes of the northern plateau of the country had been split from its fellows by different acts, policies and programs [Mikkelsen, ed. 2013:265]. This situation, in some cases, led to open hostility towards the Government; in others, only to sheer discomfort and misunderstandings. In overall, the problematic is closely linked to high levels of poverty and food insecurity.

With a population of about 400,000, the Karen (who refer to themselves as Pgay K’Nyauz) are Thailand’s largest upland ethnic group. During many decades their position in public debate was problematic, associated with marginality and with stereotyped ideas as panha chao khao, “hill
tribes problem”. One of the central issues in this debate was the protection of the environment: the presence of the indigenous people in the rainforests was considered negative for environmental protection. Until the end of the Eighties, in fact, the prevalent scientific discourse considered much of the fragile landscapes such as tropical rainforests as “pristine ecosystems” (not manipulated by human beings) thus contributing to undervalue the active role of local populations in biodiversity management and conservation of their ancestral lands; on the contrary, the human presence in these environments was regarded as dangerous for the conservation of biodiversity. In line with this approach, the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) of the Thai Government established the creation of natural reserves for forestry conservation and, as a consequence, many indigenous communities settled in those areas were displaced [Laungaramsri, 2001:31-59].

In the mid-Nineties, however, this “conservation paradigm” shifted to a more ample discussion. The role of indigenous peoples in the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity started to be recognised; systematic scientific studies on local Natural Resource Management (NRM) practices were carried out by social and natural scientists from prestigious Universities, demonstrating the dynamic role of indigenous and local communities in shaping the natural environment through resource management practices, species selection and agricultural techniques. In this framework, an important sector of Thai and international society, including activists and academics, engaged in describing how the Karen, through proper application of their “local knowledge” (khwan ru chao ban), were able to manage the forests in a non-destructive way, ensuring at the same time their self-sufficiency [Gravers, 2008]. The introduction of the Sufficiency Economy philosophy of H.M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej accelerated this shift; from the bureaucratic invisibility that forced the Karen and other indigenous communities to resettle, public institutions gradually moved towards the recognition of a specific cultural and natural capital interesting for the Nation itself [Santasombat, 2004].

In this story of changing relationship between the Thai Government and the indigenous peoples, this report will focus on the particular experience of the Karen community of Huay Hin Lad Nai. The evolution of this relation over time found an important moment in the joint design of an Innovation Plan between three indigenous communities and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, aimed at the establishment of the first Community Learning Centres for and managed by indigenous peoples in Northern Thailand. For Karen people, this project represents a crowning achievement of the long story of advocacy that took them from the edge to the centre of the public agenda on environmental-friendly practices [see Gravers, cit.]: for the Thai Government, it represents a new strategy to deal with forest conservation by integrating local communities in the sustainable management of their territories and recognizing their role in the protection of the environment. Indeed, the specific and empirical knowledge indigenous peoples have about the natural world, including soil, water bodies, plants and animals, can offer tailored solutions adapted to the local context for biodiversity conservation and sustainable NRM inside and outside Thailand.

Karen People. The Karen are indigenous to the Thailand-Myanmar border region in Southeast Asia, i.e. to South-eastern Myanmar and Western Thailand. The English term “Karen” thereby refers to a heterogeneous lot of ethnic groups, comprised of at least 20 sub-groups. In Thailand, the majority of ethnic Karen can be divided into two main sub-groups: Karen Sgaw and Pwo. In Thai language, they are referred to as “Kariang”, while the Karen call themselves “Pgaz K’Nyauz”, with the term “nyauz” meaning “person” or “human being”. Estimated numbers of Karen largely vary in decency of the source - in Thailand, there are approximately 400,000 ethnic Karen. They mainly in the provinces of Mae Hong Son, Tak, and the western part of Chiang Mai. Traditionally, they live in villages nearby a stream or river in thatched bamboo houses on stilts, and chickens, pigs and cattle are kept under the house. The majority of Karen in Thailand are Buddhists, approximately 28% are Christians (only 2% evangelic), and around 22% practice ethnic religions. By tradition, most of the Karen are paddy farmers. Particularly in Northern Thailand, however, state forest regulations - such as a ban of shifting cultivation in many national parks and wildlife sanctuaries - have led to a dramatic reduction of their traditional rotational cultivation practices, and the majority of the farmers has turned to cash crop cultivation.
Shifting cultivation as a knowledge based territorial management approach

This experience began in 2012, when IFAD, PROCASUR and AIPP (Asian Indigenous Peoples Pact) partnered for the dissemination of best practices in natural resource management by indigenous people and ethnic groups. In this context, the Karen village of Huay Hin Lad Nai was identified as an outstanding one.

This small Karen community settled in the Chiang Rai Province in the Sixties, after a series of unfortunate resettlements. The path from Burma to Thailand until Chiang Rai makes part of the community foundation myth. In the Eighties the tension with the logging companies operating in the area grew strongly. The uncontrolled exploitation of the forest was seriously threatening Huay Hin Lad Nay sources of livelihood. Due to social pressure later on the Government selected the area to establish the Khun Jae National Park. As to make themself part of the negotiation and planning process the people of Huay Hin Lad Nai answered in an unique way: Through partnership with an University demonstrated the positive impact of their traditional practices in the reforestation and sustainability of the natural resources in the area. In the practice Huay Hin Lad Nay exploit in a sustainable way the natural resources located in the buffer zone of the Khun Jae National Park. The management can be considered integral and modern, including for example a selfmanaged firebreak system.

After more than a decade of struggles, in 1999 Huay Hin Lad Nai community was officially recognised by the Thai Government as a Sustainable Village, entitling its population not only to remain in the forest, but to contribute to the pursuit of its conservation. Its achievements went even further: in 2010 the community was declared Forest Heroes by the United Nations Forest Forum, and the community leader Mr. Chai Prasert Pokha travelled to New York City to receive the award1. The globalisation from below [Appadurai, 2001] in which Karen people were engaged during decades, reached a peak with the turn of the century.

The Karen leaders translated the Karen knowledge and know how into the language of the institutions: the impact on the natural resources was measured and their holistic view of the forest as wealth provider explained. This local knowledge, owned and advocated by the communities itself become a flagship in the reversion of a well-established stigma that works pairing the Karen shifting cultivation culture with slash and burn practices.

The community thinks that the visible improvement of the area natural resources situation has to do with the learning system they practice, this to preserve but also make good use of the diverse resources from the territory. In the words of Mr. Preecha Siri, former village head and spiritual leader:

As far as today is concerned, we have pride and satisfaction in the things that we endeavoured to do. We observe that the process of [knowledge] transfer that is suitably resilient is that we teach the older children (av dof), who teach the middle children (av hsiv), who teach the small children (av pri), who then teach the infants (av praij). We think that this process will certainly carry on into the future2.

Their vision is to circulate and recreate their cultural identity as a member of the globalized society.

The bloom of the backyard gardens

The Learning Route Managing forests, sustaining lives: improving livelihoods of indigenous people and ethnic groups in the Mekong region, jointly organised by IFAD, PROCASUR and AIPP, was held between the 12th and the 19th of November, 2012, a total of twenty one leaders and professionals from Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar joined and included case studies from Lao PDR and Thailand.

1 See www.un.org/esa/forests/forest-heroes/winners.html
2 Interviewed by Darunee Singphong, July 2013.
Six were from Thailand: three officers of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC), and three indigenous leaders from the Lahu, Akha and Karen communities, all located in Northern Thailand. As part of the Learning Route's activities, all the participants were assisted in design an Innovation Plan that bring changes inspired by the Learning Route hosting communities; the so called Thai Team work together on a single plan **Community food crops and herbal farms for self-reliance**. Furthermore, the indigenous networks IMPECT (Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture Thailand) also joint the design and posterior implementation of the plan.

The Innovation Plan focused on the revitalization of traditional backyard organic gardens to grow endemic species and herbal medicines by reproducing the forest varieties at home; indeed, a traditional practice that was being lost over time. The gardens are considered spaces for teaching and learning about local plants and traditional farming methods, for this the system is a contribution of the MOAC. These are the first Community Learning Centres based on indigenous knowledge, and plan to be appropriated by the villagers when increasing the production of forest products, for both self-sufficiency and commercialization. The Innovation plan implementation started in February 2013, three months after the Learning Route.

"In the past – says the plan rationale – indigenous peoples had their backyard garden in each household. However, as a result of commercial farm promotion, mono-cropping has been adopted widely, and lead to the disappearance of backyard gardens in many villages. At present, many communities have to buy food stuff, including vegetable from the market with the implication of chemical contamination in commercial farm products".

As part of the plan, six to nine representatives from each of the three villages got trained in a Community Learning Centre in the province of Chiang Mai. Through this training, the young indigenous men and women were acquainted with new techniques to avoid the use of chemical fertilisers in agriculture, thus reducing the dependency from the market economy; they had the chance to experiment with economic activities they were not familiar with, like pig farming, small-scale farming of earth worms and fish, and were taught to produce home-made housing products such as washing liquids, shampoo and wood vinegar insect repellent. A second training focused on managing house expenses and accounting.

After the training, an agreement was signed between the MOAC and the three communities. For the first time, the indigenous peoples involved were signing as partners of a development project.

The pro-organic approach of the CLC combines well with indigenous farming customs: "In this innovation plan, community members can make use of the food crops and herbal plants in their collective gardens. In addition, community food crops and herbal gardens can be used as the learning sites for children and youth from the community and neighbouring villages".

**Huay Hin Lad Nai shows the path**

In Huay Hin Lad Nai, the implementation of the Innovation Plan had positive impact at different levels: (a) it contributes to revitalize traditional practices; (b) diversify vegetable and medicine production, contributing to food security and new income generation opportunities; (c) strengthens the relation with external actors (d) and establish the foundation for a Community Learning Centre with provincial and national scope.

As the anthropologist Michael Gravers explains, it is this strategy of combined management of natural resources and local knowledge, that helped the Karen to “move from the edge” to the centre of the official discourse on environmental preservation; the Karen, he writes, “are struggling to convert modernity and development to their tradition and adopting scientific knowledge as their local knowledge, that is, converting modern knowledge into their own customary knowledge” [2008:157]. Here, the words of **Mr. Prasert**, Huay Hin Lad Nai community leader, become relevant:

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3 About Community Learning Centres and the “sufficiency economy” philosophy of H.M. King Bhumibol, see the report “When I came back from Thailand...”.

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In the past we have done many important things, but we were recognized very slowly by others, sometimes even not recognized at all. But with this project [the Innovation Plan] the Ministry [MOAC] came to work with us, we connected with them and took benefit from it. This helps us in our work of making other people understand Karen livelihoods and philosophy: how we are connected with the forest, with our beliefs, our own culture.

So, the Innovation Plan implementation represents a new stage in the process of building collaboration and partnership. Mr. Prasert summed up this insight with these words: “PROCASUR is like a door that opens many other doors for us”.

The experience in the communities of Pha Tai Mai and Pa Kia

An initial follow up of the development of the Plan's activities was carried out at different stages by MOAC and PROCASUR between July and November 2013. The outcomes were particularly remarkable in the Lahu village of Pha Tai Mai, where the four trained people found great interest among their villagers: only 6 months after the training, about 35 of the 40 houses of the village already started cultivating a backyard garden. This was possible thanks to the leading capacity of Ms. Wassana Laba, chief of the community; and the potential of Pha Tai Mai people in implementing this innovation.

In the Akha village of Pa Kia the backyard gardens are already being used as an embryonic Community Learning Centre. Among the Akha many communities abandoned their traditional farming methods to adopt mono-crops, especially coffee [see Li, 2012]; the Innovation Plan in Pa Kia represents a possibility to improve food security in the Akha community, and at the same time to establish a new channel of relationship between the government and the communities, based in a revitalization of tradition, within a framework of state-sponsored economic development. The village’s leader, Mr. Wi Chai and his deputy Mr. Manop, not only were very active in creating backyard gardens (with compost collection, pig farm, chicken farm...), but also began to use the gardens as a teaching space. Two or three teaching visits with representatives of neighbouring villages have already been conducted in Pa Kia, where the idea of opening up to tourism is being seriously debated. Other new activities are also in progress, like a fishing pond and a formalised structure of community forestry. For Mr. Wi Chai these activities represent an opportunity to create jobs in the village and to prevent emigration, as he saw in Huay Hin Lad Nai during the Learning Route.

In the three villages, the design and implementation of the Innovation Plan opened new opportunities for the indigenous groups to collaborate together, interweaving a network of mutual help and solidarity that goes beyond the existing relationships. The aim of this new collaboration is the idea of managing together the natural resources and building a teaching device within communities. Benefits are both economically and political.

A final note: What changes in the hosts of the Learning Routes

The experience of being a host had a strong impact on the people of Huay Hin Lad Nai. In the first place, it helped the inhabitants of Huay Hin Lad Nai to develop their communicational skills: the village was already receiving many visits, but these were carried out with little organisation. The systematisation methodology contributed to the development of a still informal learning curriculum, using timelines, maps of actors and from the territory among other tools to share the knowledge and support its appropriation by the visitors. In the words of Mr. Bundit Siri:

In our village many visitors come: NGOs, schools, University professors, researchers, sometimes even 2 or 3 groups at a time. This was chaotic at the beginning; but thanks to the Learning Route I learned how to manage time, and how to manage my team. Now we organize our team to play different roles, and even if we have two three group at the same time we can manage it very well, following Learning Route training style”.

4 All interviews by Darunee Singphong, July 2013
This methodology represents for them a new tool for advocacy, that increased self-confidence, brought in pedagogical skills and learning products and capture the attention of the public domain. The tools and exposure are contributing to overcome the stereotype of “Karen shyness”. As Mr. Bundit explains:

Thanks to the Learning Route I became more confident with my presentation, in giving a speech to the public, in leading the group. The action plan helped me to learn to build a time-line, a responsibilities table, a calendar of activities: now when I organize plans I follow a schedule, so I can see the progress of my work and make things clearer. For example: before the Learning Route we explained the history of the village to visitors, but now we found a new way to explain it, with drawings, photos, devices that somehow capture more the attention of the people. This is very different from just writing and speaking. These new things I learned are really useful, and can be applied here in my village.

References


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