

Chapter 5

Competition over resources in a commercialised agricultural village

[S]ocial practice... is a process in which the meaning of human action is constructed. ... [M]eaning cannot be permanently fixed; it is always changing such that even the very recognition of identity relies on an ongoing process of articulation of meanings. Dominant hegemonic practices tend towards closure of the social (that is, to project a “society”; for instance, the New World Order); in the process of so doing, however, antagonisms emerge, which in turn make possible the emergence of new actors and discourses.

A. Escobar¹

This chapter aims to demonstrate how an NGO working at the community level sought the help of other NGO networks operating at regional and national levels to intervene in the competition over the use of productive resources between small-scale producers, government officials and business companies. The NGO intervention helped producers to increase their bargaining power with middlemen and to formulate a people’s organisation. It also provided a political space for representatives of the people’s organisation to negotiate their interests with politicians and business agents. This case occurred in a commercialised agricultural village – Village 2 – where the water resource supply was being affected by forest depletion occurring in Village 1 and other villages in the watershed area.

A description of the social and economic changes in this village reveals that the villagers have been engaged in agricultural commercialisation since the 1930s. The more these people have been involved in the market-oriented economy, the more they have entered into complicated competition over productive resources (capital, land and water) not only among themselves but also with politicians, bureaucrats and business agents. I shall trace the involvement of FEDRA and its NGO networks as they have dealt with the social and economic problems in Village 2 during the 1980s and in so doing also demonstrate how FEDRA elaborated alternative meanings of “community culture” as used in the people’s daily life to achieve their participation and to formulate a people’s organisation which would lead collective protest. The protest opened up a political space for the villagers to negotiate their economic interest and obtain a fair share of resources. Finally, I shall discuss the interventionist role of NGOs in relation to other actors in the process of competition over productive resources.

¹ Escobar, 1992, “Imagining a Post-Development Era?...”, p. 38.

This chapter argues that when an NGO is able to recognise the pattern of social relations and tension occurring amidst its social practice, it is likely to be able to construct a new social meaning; to search for a new actor; and to formulate or reform an organisation to represent the people. It is also likely to be able to identify a political space for the actors who become involved in a given situation to negotiate and mediate their conflicting interests. This on-going process of recognising social relations and tensions occurs not only between the NGO and other social actors but also within the NGO itself. It is necessary for the NGO to analyse the relations between actors and system and between social integration and social conflicts in a locality rather than analysing them separately.

Village context

Village 2 is located about 30 km northwest of Chiang Mai city. Its land, about 1,800 rai, is at an altitude of about 300 to 400 m and slopes from the west down to the east of the village. About 30 per cent to the west is steep land and forest hills used for fruit orchards and *miang* (tea) gardens.² The rest is lowland in the east used for growing rice and cash crops such as tobacco, soya bean, pigeon pea and, recently, potato. For generations, villagers have built and maintained three small weirs to store water from the mountains to irrigate their crops, especially wet-rice.³ The villagers are very conscious of the vulnerability of the ecological system in the watershed area especially as Village 2 has a forest boundary on the west with Village 1. They believe that forest depletion in the watershed area was a major factor in a water shortage in Village 2 in the early 1990s.

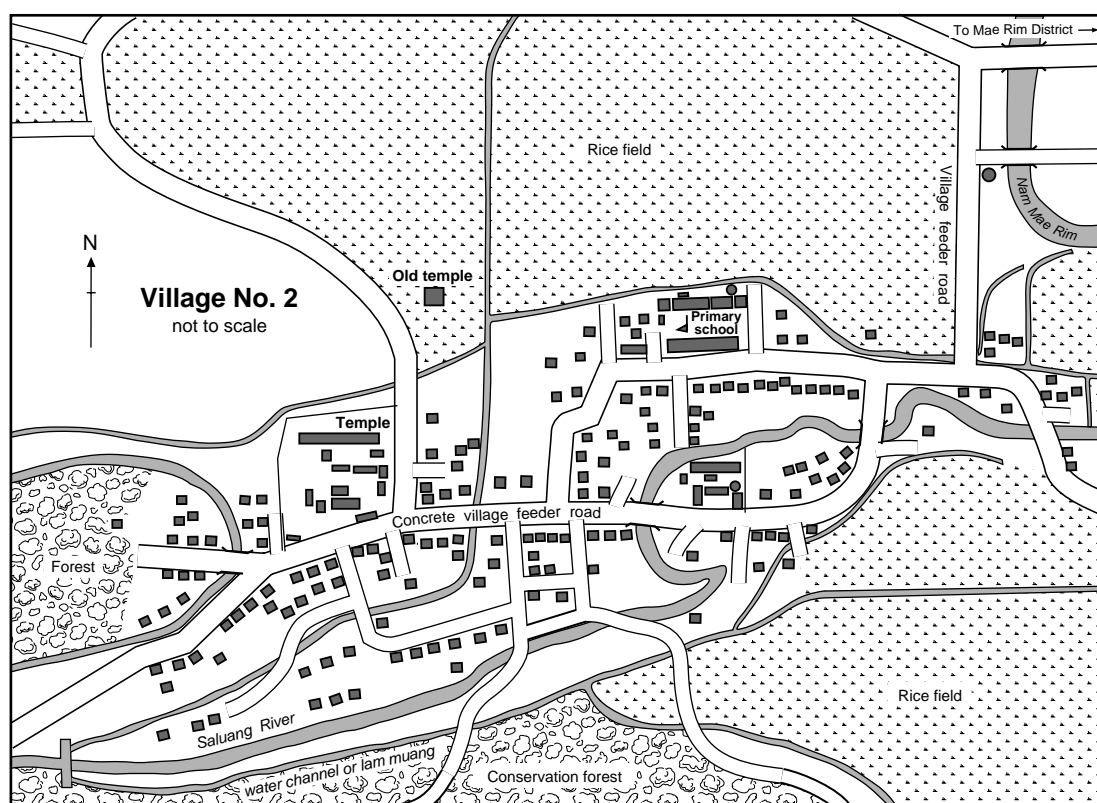
In 1993, Village 2 comprised about 176 households with a population of 660, compared to 150 households in 1985 (see Map 5.1).⁴ Most were engaged in growing cash crops which they sold to middlemen who traded between the village and the city. Several villagers had, recently, begun to be involved in contract farming with some agribusiness companies established in Mae Rim and San Sai districts. Compared to other

² To obtain information about the development and decline of the *miang* industry in Northern Thailand, one of the comprehensive studies is C. Mougne, 1992, "Survivors and Accumulators: Changing Patterns of *Pa Miang* in the 1970s", in G. Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman, *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, Department of Anthropology, RSPAS, ANU, pp. 73-103.

³ Villagers call the rice farming which depends on traditional irrigation system "*na nam mu'ang*" or "*na nam fai*". In some agricultural areas in the Upper North where the water can be kept naturally without man-made irrigation systems, the villagers call that kind of rice farming "*na nam fai*". Interview, INT-105-VIL, 24 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁴ Interview, INT-108-VIL, 25 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai; and SRI, 1985 (2528), *Laksana thang setthakit sangkhom...*, Appendix, n.p.

villages under study, the social differentiation in Village 2 was the most distinctive. It consisted of four main groups, classified in terms of ownership of land, house and agricultural equipment, and the capacity to earn income or acquire assets. There were 21 households in the first group of relatively high-incomes; 60 households in the second group of middle-incomes; and 65 in the third group of lower-middle-income villagers. The 125 households in the latter two groups made up the majority of villagers who owned from 5 to 10 rai of low and fertile land which they used for commercial agriculture. About 30 households representing over 100 villagers, or one-sixth of the village population, belonged to the fourth group composed of landless peasants who earned their income as wage workers within and outside the village. Village 2 has easy access to transportation; it takes about 40 minutes to travel by minibus to Chiang Mai city via feeder roads and the Chiang Mai-Fang highway. Thus, the villagers and their children are able to commute daily between the village and the city to go to markets, schools, colleges, universities and factories.



Map 5.1: Village 2 and Its Surroundings in 1992.

Source: Map drawn by Damrong Khammun, a village leader.

Most small-scale cultivators were descended from the early generations of settlers and owned, on average, 5 to 10 rai of land. They still maintained traditional practices, such as that of social formation, the “*wai phi pu nja*” ceremony in which the family

members came together for “paying respect to the spirits of the ancestors”⁵ and that of “*muat song khao wat*” or the taking of turns among villagers to send food and other basic necessities to the monks in the village temple. However, I observed that people divided themselves into two groups. One comprised landless villagers who lived at the west of the village and most of whom had migrated from other districts of Chiang Mai and were employed by forestry officials in the teak plantations. Since the early 1960s, they had settled here and become tenants and wage earners on village farms. Some had been involved in cutting timber illegally for traders outside the village. The other consisted of small-scale producers who lived at the east end of the village. Their forebears had been there for over 100 years and they were proud of their heritage and accepted responsibility for the survival of the village.⁶ Eleven people from this group were members of a village committee (*khana kammakan muban*) appointed by the district head. The committee comprised both informal and formal leaders who were able to use both traditional and modern systems of administration and culture to support their current needs and future expectations. The leaders of the small-scale cultivators tapped external resources and services from both government and NGOs and made them available to other villagers including the landless peasants. Nonetheless, since the early 1990s when small-scale producers faced water shortages – especially during the dry season – relations have become tense with the landless peasants who they claimed caused the water shortage by cutting timber on the hill above the village. The small-scale producers also felt dissatisfied with local forestry officials and accused them of turning a blind eye to the illegal loggers.

The history of this village reveals that the inhabitants have been engaged in commercial agriculture since the late 1930s. The initiative of private entrepreneurs and the support of government policies were key factors in convincing villagers to engage in cash cropping. For instance, in 1938, tobacco production from a tobacco kiln some 2 km from Village 2 began to expand (see Chapter 2). The new manager of the kiln persuaded the villagers to grow Virginia-Richmond tobacco (locally called *ya mo:n*) to replace the native tobacco species which they normally planted after the rice harvest. At that time the government was also encouraging villagers to grow cash crops. In the case of the tobacco business, government-owned radio stations made announcements (*prakat siang tam sai*) offering the new type of tobacco seeds free of charge. They also reported that an increasing number of villagers were successfully growing tobacco as a cash crop. These reports aimed to encourage more people to become involved.⁷ In

⁵ P.T. Cohen and G. Wijeyewardene (eds), 1984, “Introduction: Spirit Cults and the Position of Women in Northern Thailand”, *Mankind*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Special Issue 3), August, pp. 249-262; and M.V. McMorran, 1984, “Northern Thai Ancestral Cults: Authority and Aggression”, in *ibid.*, pp. 308-314.

⁶ Interview, INT-104-VIL, 23 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁷ Interview, INT-135-BUS, 25 February 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

1943, Tho:ng-in Chaoprayun, a local MP, persuaded villagers to build a feeder road to connect Village 2 with the main road to the city.⁸ As the feeder road would not only provide access to transportation for the tobacco company but also for villagers to go to hospitals, schools and markets, they were willing to cooperate.

In the late 1960s, many villagers began to replace native rice species (such as *khao phalek*, *khao phatho:ng* and *khao pe-khao*) with high yield varieties (HYVs – such as *khao kor khor* 4 and 6) introduced by a Sub-district extension officer (*kaset tambon*). One of the reasons that the new strains of rice were accepted was that it had been observed that instead of coming in May, “very often the rains were delayed until July”.⁹ This meant that the native species, which took four months to ripen, were not harvested until November. It was then too late to put in a second (cash) crop. The HYV rice was adopted because it would ripen in three months and therefore allow a second crop to be planted. From the mid-1970s, the villagers also began to switch from growing Virginia-Richmond tobacco to soya bean as a cash crop – mainly because the income from soya bean was higher.¹⁰ It was also claimed by a former employee that the kiln owner often took advantage (*ao priap*) of villagers by downgrading their tobacco and giving them a lower price.¹¹ As a result, when the Sub-district extension officer suggested that the villagers grow soya bean as a new cash crop they had little hesitation in doing so.

As the villagers became increasingly engaged in cash crops which were potentially profitable, they began to make commercial arrangements between themselves and their relatives. A land rent of half of the seasonal production was applied to all tenants including family members. The buffalo rent increased to about 40 thang of rice per season. *Pho:luang* Wan, the village head from 1981 to 1987, revealed that although individual tenants complained of the high rents, they could not change them. He said he had seen some peasants crying because they had nothing left to feed their families after paying rents and other debts to landowners and money lenders.¹²

⁸ Interview, INT-105-VIL, 24 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁹ The tenth month of the Northern calendar. Interview, INT-116-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

¹⁰ Soya bean species such as *sor jor* 1, 4, 5 and 6 were used. Soya bean was grown in the North of Thailand traditionally for household consumption. It has become a cash crop in this village since the late 1960s.

¹¹ Interview, INT-105-VIL, 24 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. Two villagers claimed that the kiln owner was currently expanding his business to housing and fruit orchards while keeping tobacco as a sideline business. Interview, INT-035-VIL, 25 November 1992; Interview, INT-103-VIL, 23 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

¹² Interview, INT-116-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

When student activists from Chiang Mai University undertook a campaign in Mae Rim district to inform people about the Land Rent Control Act of 1974 (see Chapter 3) they came briefly to Village 2 to ask whether a problem of high rents existed in the village. They intended to use the issue of high rents to convince the tenants and landless peasants to join the PFT, a nationwide people's organisation set up in 1974 to support small-scale producers mostly from the Central Plain and Lower Northern Region. The PFT was established with the support of student activists. However, the villagers they met were mostly landowners who denied any tensions between the tenants and themselves because, they said, they were "dealing with each other following the kinship system" (*khao tham kan tam rabop phino:ng*).¹³ The students did not identify the tenants because, at that time, they had little understanding about the complexity of social differentiation among villagers. The students were unable to advance their political campaign in Village 2 because, as an elderly villager recalled, most of the people were "small-scale producers, occupying from 5-10 rai of land" who feared losing income from land rent and consequently did not want to cooperate with the students.¹⁴ A former student leader, who undertook political campaigns in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces at that time, endorsed the elderly villager's views. He added that the student movement in the mid-1970s operated on the presumption of class conflict between "big landlords", or "*jao thidin yai*", and their tenants. However, most landlords in the North were middle- to small-scale producers occupying not more than 50 rai of land. In the end, the political activities of the students did little more than create tensions between small-scale producers and tenants.¹⁵

After the students departed without tackling the problem of high land and buffalo rents faced by tenants in this village, *Pho:luang* Wan took responsibility as a village leader to find a source of welfare for the poor villagers. Some years later, he was told about FEDRA and its activities by the "*jaonathi kaset amphoe*" or "district extension officer" who later introduced *Pho:luang* Wan to *Phra Dhammadilok* (Jan Gusalo), the FEDRA Chairperson. When they met, *Pho:luang* Wan invited the Chairperson and FEDRA workers to come to the village to discuss with the poor the ways to alleviate their poverty.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Interview, INT-113-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

¹⁵ Interview, INT-071-STU, 6 January 1993, Chiang Mai. See an explanation of land tenure conditions such as size of land holdings and social relations of land tenure in Tanabe, 1994, *Ecology and Practical Technology...*, pp. 113-121.

NGO involvement and activities

Tending the tenants

When FEDRA workers went to Village 2 in 1984, ten years after the student's political campaigns, they found various social and economic activities occurring on several fronts. For example, local officials from four ministries had already organised village householders, housewives, and youth into groups, whose main activity between 1981 and 1983 involved a "clean houses and tidiness" contest between villages (*prakuat muban*) which was seen as a symbol of the "developed village model" (*muban phatthana tuayang*).¹⁶ Many villagers, especially the poor, were frustrated by this officially sponsored "development" because it left them little time to earn their living, and they considered it to be superficial because it did not help reduce their poverty.¹⁷

After explaining FEDRA's development principles in relation to projects such as rice banks, buffalo banks and revolving funds, the Chairperson gave eleven buffaloes and two oxen to thirteen tenants to set up a buffalo bank project so that they did not have to pay buffalo rent.¹⁸ Unlike many other charitable organisations, FEDRA asked each buffalo caretaker to contribute 3 thang of paddy per buffalo as rent per year. The contribution was kept in a rice bank which was also set up with FEDRA's help. The rice bank provided paddy which villagers could borrow if there was a rice shortage. The twin projects of rice bank and buffalo bank helped reduce the high rent burden on tenants. For instance, under the commercial arrangements in many Northern villages, a tenant had to pay rent of up to 50 per cent of agricultural produce. On top of that he had to pay 35 to 40 thang of paddy to hire a buffalo per season and to pay 18 to 20 thang on a loan of 10 thang of paddy for consumption. In addition, he needed seeds, tools, labour and other agricultural inputs. If a tenant rented 5 rai of land and produced about 60 thang per rai, he would have had 300 thang per season. If he had to repay debt in the commercial system, he would barely meet the family's basic needs for food, clothes, medicine and shelter; quite apart from hospital cost, should there be an accident to a family member. Under the FEDRA programme, however, a tenant would need only 3 thang of paddy per year to hire a buffalo and 12 thang to meet a 10 thang loan and be more likely to meet all household needs. If he had severe problems and was unable to repay a debt, he would also be able to negotiate with FEDRA to extend the period of repayment.

¹⁶ Such as Ministries of Health, Education, Interior, Agriculture and Cooperatives.

¹⁷ Interview, INT-035-VIL, 25 November 1992, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

¹⁸ Interview, INT-116-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

Buffalo bank projects have been widely implemented by NGOs in rural Thailand. FEDRA's approach was to make use of the Buddhist culture of alms-giving. When well-to-do people from Bangkok and other cities sought the advice of *Phra* Dhammadilok and proposed giving "alms to relieve their sickness and distress" (*thambun to: ayu*), he would suggest that they save the life of a large animal. FEDRA workers would then help these people to purchase an ox or buffalo which was about to be killed in a slaughter house, and donate it to poor peasants who did not have any buffalo to work in the field. Using the Buddhist teaching of "Four Noble Truths" which most people in Village 2 accepted as their "community culture", the FEDRA Chairperson taught that the rich, the poor and the animals all encountered "suffering" (*dukkha*) in different ways. In this case, the rich suffered from illness, the poor from poverty, the animals from being tortured and killed. He, therefore, organised an alms-giving ceremony in which he invited both buffalo donors and caretakers to participate. While performing a ritual buffalo donation, he used the buffalo as a religious "tool kit" (*yu'a*) to educate both the donor and caretaker about "*metta*" or "loving-kindness" and the Buddha's teaching that the individual should "wish for the welfare and happiness of others".¹⁹ In this way, *Phra* Dhammadilok helped the buffalo donors to feel relieved of their sickness and suffering through saving the life of an animal in danger and assisting those less fortunate than themselves. At the same time, it was believed that the buffalo would provide economic support to the disadvantaged landless peasants and help them to survive the threat of food shortage and ever-accumulating debt.

FEDRA's attempt to tackle rural poverty through economic and spiritual approaches was not an easy task. One of the difficulties was that when villagers had shaped the buffalo bank activities to achieve economic efficiency, the initial purpose of social value was lost. The disappearance of social meaning in cases such as this was not always evident and *Phra* Dhammadilok, who had spent most of his life in the monkhood, did not realise what was happening and was thus unable to reconstruct his own teaching accordingly. For example, in 1979, many people from other villages where FEDRA had established buffalo banks, had complained about the poor quality of the cattle donated to them, some of which were untamed, others weak or sick. Some villagers even brought cattle back to FEDRA, which had to change its process of selecting and buying cattle. Instead of buying them from a slaughter house, FEDRA workers and village caretakers would go together to the cattle market (locally called *kad wua*) to select and purchase good quality cattle which would be approved by the "village development committee".²⁰ As the initial meaning of loving-kindness had

¹⁹ Acharya Buddharakkhita, 1989, *Metta: The Philosophy & Practice of Universal Love*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, p. 1.

²⁰ Vanpen, 1989, "Issues and Experiences in the Use of Community Participation...", p. 85.

disappeared, FEDRA's buffalo bank projects became a mere economic force for capital accumulation not only for landless peasants but also for other villagers.

Shifting from the tenants to mobilise agricultural investment for small-scale cultivators

When the village leaders, who came from the group of small-scale producers, saw how the tenants benefited from FEDRA's buffalo bank and rice bank projects, they too became interested in obtaining financial assistance from the NGO to raise funds for their own agricultural investment. They understood FEDRA's working processes and realised that if they were to receive FEDRA assistance they would have to contribute their labour or some materials to demonstrate their "participation" in the development. They therefore proposed to build a rice barn with building materials donated by the villagers themselves. Then they asked FEDRA to help set up a rice bank project. FEDRA accepted, and also agreed to set up and provide administrative and financial assistance to village development committees to be run by the villagers. FEDRA believed it needed two committees as it did not want to impose too much work on individuals. A rice bank committee and a buffalo bank committee were therefore set up with five elected members each; some of the latter were also members of the government-appointed village committee. FEDRA allowed those from the official committee to be members of the NGO committees as it did not want to upset relationships between villagers and officials. It was noticeable, however, that there were no representatives of landless peasants on either committee and this could be interpreted as indicating that FEDRA's target group was beginning to move away from the tenants to small-scale producers.

Once the village development committees had taken over the control of the buffalo and rice banks with FEDRA's agreement, the committee used the broad appeal of the traditional ceremony of "*thambun khaomai*" (or "celebrating the new rice") adapting it to mobilise village resources for further investment. In the first year (1984), the rice bank committee stored 200 thang of paddy collected from rice bank members. The members of the rice bank agreed that if any paddy remained in the storage at the end of the year in excess of the members' loans, the committee would sell the remaining paddy for cash. The cash would become available to the members to borrow for agricultural investment purposes.²¹

The village leaders knew also of another source of FEDRA financial assistance, called a revolving fund project. Through this project, loans were provided to villagers to invest in income-generating agricultural activities such as cash cropping and pig raising. FEDRA would first set up a village committee to manage the revolving fund project.

²¹ FEDRA, 1987 (2530), "Rai-ngan muban" [Village Report], [in Thai], Chiang Mai.

Normally, FEDRA would lend from its budget up to 1,000 baht at 10 per cent per year interest compared with the 60 per cent charged by money lenders. The loan was to be repaid to FEDRA but the interest would be retained by the village committee as a saving fund for village investment. The villagers were aware that FEDRA always had problems getting their loan back; neither was any payment of the interest to the committee assured. *Pho:luang* Wan, who was on the revolving fund committee, therefore proposed a tough regime to manage FEDRA's loan. Instead of giving the full amount of 1,000 baht to a borrower, the committee proposed that the 100 baht interest be deducted in the first place, and only 900 baht be provided. If the borrower delayed repayment the committee would increase the interest rate to 30 per cent.²² FEDRA accepted *Pho:luang* Wan's approach to economic management of the project without questioning the social dimensions of this sort of approach. In this case, *Pho:luang* Wan acted as if he were a bank manager rather than a village leader working in an NGO project with social objectives.

While FEDRA administrators remained more familiar with the "top down" rather than with "bottom up" approaches, FEDRA fieldworkers on the ground were quickly aware of the consequences of the economic projects (rice bank, buffalo bank and revolving fund). For example, tensions emerged between formal and informal village leaders, especially *Pho:luang* Wan and Saen, a young middle-income villager, as each sought to gain recognition from the villagers. Being placed under the village development committee's control, the FEDRA workers found it difficult to know whether the committee used the projects for the disadvantaged. The FEDRA workers saw that FEDRA had in effect shifted its target groups from the tenants and landless peasants to middle and relatively high-income villagers. In part this was because FEDRA's main objective generally was to help rural people to develop and maintain their livelihood in village communities. It was also because FEDRA saw that the cost of production was too high, not only for the landless peasants, but also for the small-scale producers to be able to afford the risk of agricultural investment. FEDRA had, therefore, agreed to assist the wider group of villagers through its development projects. However, after FEDRA's assistance shifted to the better-off villagers, tensions also arose among small-scale producers who were seeking access to funds for agriculture. The fieldworkers asked FEDRA to slow down its economic projects for fear that they might cause more serious problems between key village leaders as had occurred in Village 1. They also urged FEDRA to emphasise the social meaning of its development activities along with the economic objectives in accordance with its slogan: "Economics and spirituality must be used together to solve problems".²³ Some FEDRA committee members heeded these warnings and tried to mediate different interests and misunderstandings between

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Vanpen, 1989, "Issues and Experiences in the Use of Community Participation...", p. 81.

the tenants and small-scale producers, for instance, asking the landowners to have sympathy with the tenants – whose crops had failed due to uncontrollable situations – by reducing the cost of land rent.

As a result of these problems, FEDRA decided to review its project activities in Village 2. However, before the review could begin, village leaders asked FEDRA to help solve the problem growers were having with a soya bean disease which was seriously reducing their cash incomes.²⁴ FEDRA workers approached the Mae Jo Agricultural College in Chiang Mai for assistance. The College subsequently agreed that a soya bean expert on its staff should investigate the cause of the disease. The expert spent almost two years experimenting in Village 2. By 1985, she had successfully overcome the problem by creating a new species of disease resistant soya bean which was named “Chiang Mai 60”. This had occurred with the support of the sub-district extension officer (*jaonathi kaset tambon*) who was responsible for promoting agricultural commercialisation in Village 2. The villagers were able to make good money (about 250 to 300 baht per thang) from selling the propagating seeds for the new species, which FEDRA workers helped to distribute through its community networks to other villages such as the Lua village and Villages 1 and 3 (see Chapter 6).²⁵ To help soya bean growers in FEDRA operating areas reduce the cost of production, FEDRA also negotiated with business companies in Chiang Mai for the sale of chemical fertiliser and insecticide at a discount price to the growers. This encouraged the small-scale producers in Village 2 and others who had land, labour and investment available to become involved in growing “Chiang Mai 60”. As the production of the new soya bean increased, growers were able to select the best quality bean to sell as propagating seed and dispose of the rest raw to food factories (for uses such as making vegetable oil and salted soya bean (*tao jieo*)). As a result, the growers further increased their profit from soya bean. Having seen this, the new sub-district extension officer expressed his opinion that the NGO had played a role in helping the villagers to change some traditional beliefs and values and had encouraged them to adopt modern ways of agricultural production (using chemical fertilisers and insecticides). He said that the NGO could help stimulate agricultural commercialisation better than extension officers because it offered financial assistance, which was not available to the officers. He also

²⁴ In the mid 1980s when small-scale cultivators in Village 2 had the problem of soya bean disease, *Pho:luang* Kham, a village head, contacted an agricultural company in Chiang Mai to find an alternative crop. The company suggested that the villagers grow *basmati* rice to replace soya bean. Only five villagers adopted the company’s suggestion for a year and gave up because *basmati* rice was not profitable. The company did not follow up with the villagers’ *basmati* rice production because its interest changed to other crops. After the soya bean experiment was successful, these villagers switched from the *basmati* rice to soya bean. Interview, INT-099-VIL, 22 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai

²⁵ Interview, INT-103-VIL, 23 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

considered that the NGO encouraged the villagers to act confidently in agricultural innovation and commercialisation.²⁶

In summary, FEDRA had shifted the focus of its work in Village 2 from the tenants to the middle and relatively high-income groups of villagers. Even though the latter two groups were better off than the former one, they were, nonetheless, disadvantaged by the government's promotion of market economy initiated by middlemen and private entrepreneurs. As far as FEDRA's objective "to promote agricultural producers" (*songsoem kasiko:n*) was concerned, FEDRA had tried to respond to the producers' needs. It had, subsequently, become deeply involved in village agricultural commercialisation, very much in line with government policies. The experience of FEDRA in Village 2 shows how the NGO could become an influence stimulating agrarian change. Some FEDRA fieldworkers were, however, aware of the possible consequences. They were afraid that while implementing economic activities, FEDRA might ignore its social priorities and shift its support away from the disadvantaged whom it intended to serve.

Formulating a people's organisation

While FEDRA fieldworkers were helping villagers to conduct the operations of the rice bank, buffalo bank and revolving fund, they were also observing the relationships between villagers, and between villagers and middlemen from the city markets. The FEDRA workers noticed that the small-scale cultivators of Village 2 still maintained some traditional practices such as paying respect to their ancestors (*wai phi pu nja*) at the annual family reunion, and organising groups to sustain the irrigation system (*rabop mu'ang fai*). These people's practices demonstrated their socio-economic power and the unity embedded in everyday phenomena. They also noticed that – as happened elsewhere in rural Thailand – the growers in Village 2 often received low prices for their products from the middlemen, especially when the individual growers negotiated separately with them. The FEDRA workers, therefore, suggested to the growers that they could fare better if they grouped together to set up a single soya bean price and prevent the middlemen from bargaining with one grower against another.

Following this advice, the soya bean growers received more profit than before and, moreover, appreciated the power of joint bargaining with the middlemen. Having seen this, the FEDRA workers went a step further and proposed forming a "people's organisation" to represent the soya bean growers' interests. The growers of Village 2 agreed with the FEDRA workers and began, in 1985, to organise a soya bean growers' group, initially in the form of an agricultural cooperative. Within a year, the

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Interview, INT-125-GOV, 19 February 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

cooperative had attracted 672 villagers covering 14 villages in Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts. The FEDRA workers were also quick to move forwards and asked for the villagers' agreement to turn the cooperative into a Soya Bean Growers' Association (SBGA), an embryo for a people's organisation which would act as a focus to unite soya bean growers in two districts.²⁷ The SBGA was set up with the consent of the people but without government agreement and without being registered. Hence, local officials kept a close eye on it as an illegal organisation which they suspected might cause political unrest.

The FEDRA workers planned to scale-up the SBGA from a village to a national organisation. They also hoped it would become the foundation for a national peasants' council which would be set up as an umbrella organisation of different agricultural cooperatives eventually run by the people themselves. The dream of the FEDRA workers was to recreate a new genuine peasants' organisation to represent the peasants' interests as had been done in the past by the PFT – the outlawed people's organisation of the mid-1970s.²⁸ This reflected the link between the student activists who set up the early social movement in Thailand and the NGO workers who in the eighties began to form social movements despite the involvement of different social actors and the chronological discontinuity.

The FEDRA fieldworkers not only advised the members of the SBGA on election of the SBGA committee but also helped train the committee members, who had little formal education, to run the SBGA. For instance, when the SBGA members expressed their lack of confidence in the idea of the committee managing their money, the FEDRA workers organised training courses for the committee on several issues such as how to organise a meeting, manage bookkeeping and other relevant subjects. When the committee showed that they were able to run their organisation, the FEDRA workers stood aside and began to undertake other activities to support the SBGA. For example, they organised study tours for soya bean growers to visit companies which used soya bean as raw agricultural inputs to make vegetable oil, soya sauce and salted soya bean. The study tours aimed to encourage the ordinary villagers to understand the process of soya bean production beyond their farm gate and to gather ideas for developing their own cottage industries. The FEDRA workers believed that if the villagers could do

²⁷ Prayat Jaturapho:nphithakkun, 1987 (2530), "Prasopkan ngan si pi: Chomrom phu pluk thualu'ang" [Four-Year Experience of the Soya Bean Growers' Association], [in Thai], Paper presented in the seminar: "The People's Movement" held on 18-20 February at the Office of Northern Agriculture, Chiang Mai.

²⁸ Interview, INT-034-NGO, 25 November 1992, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

this, they would have created their own alternative development based on a self-reliant philosophy.²⁹

While the FEDRA male fieldworkers were helping soya bean growers organise the SBGA, the female fieldworkers were helping women villagers establish their own groups under the FEDRA project called “Metta Nari” (meaning “loving-kindness for women”). The project focused its activities on handicrafts, such as crochet, embroidery and appliqué, to produce goods such as tablecloths, bedspreads and other embroideries. The objective of these handicraft activities was to raise additional family income. While running the activities, the FEDRA workers discussed with the women in Village 2 and seven other villages, socio-political issues arising from the impact of rural transformation on the village livelihood. The discussions encouraged the women to appreciate their own capacity to create alternative development.

With regard to economic activities, FEDRA helped set up a shop in the compound of the Temple “Wat Pa Daraphirom”, where FEDRA’s office is located, to sell handicrafts made by the women working in the Metta Nari project. The FEDRA manager helped organise marketing for the sale of handicrafts on behalf of the villagers. With FEDRA’s support, the villagers, including women from Village 2, decided to take turns at running the shop by themselves. Some bought shares, at 20 baht per share, in the Handicraft Cooperative which was then established and operated from the Temple compound. As handicrafts were in demand both within the country and overseas, the Cooperative prospered, although it was not yet registered. Each year, it holds an annual meeting and reports its activities to the grass-roots members who elected the committee to run the Cooperative. In the early 1990s, *Phra* Dhammadilok lent 300,000 baht from the Metta Nari Project to the women’s committee to expand the work of the Handicraft Cooperative into new villages.³⁰ In so doing, he expected to see the Cooperative become a model for alternative development, based on the concept of people’s “self-reliance”, which FEDRA could promote. I had a chance to witness this in early November 1992 when I was visiting *Phra* Dhammadilok and discussing with him the current transformation in rural Thailand. Two provincial officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives came to ask him to register the Handicraft Cooperative under the Department of Cooperative Promotion. He replied: “*hai phro:m sa ko:n*” or “Let it mature”. In other words, he expected to see ordinary women villagers run their own Cooperative by themselves without official interference. Whether or not the Handicraft Cooperative should be registered depended, he said, on the members of the Cooperative making that decision themselves.

²⁹ FEDRA, 1992 (2535), “Phatthanakan klum thualu’ang: Jak adit su patjuban” [The Development of Soya Bean Growers’ Association: From the Past to Present], [in Thai], Chiang Mai.

³⁰ Interview, INT-052-NGO, 24 December 1992, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai

In summary, FEDRA helped small-scale producers and female villagers formulate their organisations in the form of cooperatives based on a philosophy of “self-reliant development”. FEDRA put a lot of effort into nursing the embryo of people’s organisations and expected that, in time, villagers would be able to manage their own organisations by themselves, allowing FEDRA to move out of the village altogether. However, the development process is never unilinear and as one problem seems to be solved another emerges. That is, as Melucci argues, because “the differences change, the conflicts shift, the agreements cease to satisfy and new forms of domination are constantly emerging”.³¹ Thus, the situation faced by the SBGA changed during the early 1990s when the Thai government decided to comply with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). At the demand of the animal food company associations, the government agreed to remove the existing import quota and allow the import of soya bean residue. While this was in the companies’ interest, it was to have a negative impact on soya bean growers and force them to formulate a response. While the SBGA was suffering this setback, however, the Handicraft Cooperative continued to run smoothly without any interruption.

Facing the impact of the free-market economy

The Thai government’s decision to adhere to the GATT in relation to soya bean imports benefited animal food factories while breaking the relationship between small-scale soya bean growers and vegetable oil refinery companies. Before 1989, the government’s quota system permitted the import of two-thirds of the country’s soya bean needs. The quota arrangements meant that the domestic price for soya bean was higher than the import price. While the soya bean growers benefited from this, it had minimal effect on the vegetable oil refinery companies which were able to pass on the additional cost in the price charged for the soya bean residue they sold to animal food producers. This meant that the animal food factories were bearing the cost of the quota. Between 1989 and 1990, the animal food factories organised themselves into an association and lobbied the Chatchai government to do away with the quota system and to allow the importation of 300,000 tons of soya bean residue per year, especially from the US. The animal food producers’ association threatened that if the government did not comply with the association’s demands, it would have to raise the price of animal food which would result in an increase in the price of meat and thereby impact on the cost of living for meat consumers, particularly in big cities. For fear of losing urban electoral support, the government acceded to the association’s demand and agreed to the importation of residue in early 1990. However, this meant that the vegetable oil companies could not maintain the price paid to small-scale soya bean growers as they could no longer charge the animal food factories the inflated price for residue. As a

³¹ Melucci, 1988, “Social Movements and the Democratisation...”, p. 251.

result, the small-scale producers faced a drop in the price of soya bean from around 9 to 6 baht per kg.³²

Villagers responded to the declining price of soya bean by looking for new cash crops which would yield a higher price. During this time, a few brokers from agri-business companies were offering contract farming deals to villagers for the production of vegetables such as green beans, pigeon pea, eggplant and potato. Several villagers in Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts, including some in Village 2, agreed, without written contracts, to grow new cash crops. FEDRA fieldworkers and their NGO networks in Chiang Mai, as well as a few officials from the Northern Agricultural Office, expressed their concern about the verbal contracts being arranged and were afraid that the villagers could be ‘exploited’ by the agri-business companies. Although the villagers were aware of the possible consequences which concerned the NGOs, they had not yet found better alternatives.³³

The FEDRA workers and their NGO networks tried to keep villagers informed about the situation in relation to contract farming so that the villagers would avoid the pitfalls. For instance, they invited Dr Somphop Manarangsarn, an economist from the Political Economy Centre of Chulalongkorn University, to Chiang Mai to explain the impact of government policies on soya bean growers, and the prospects for agri-business in soya bean production. Seventeen participants, both NGO workers and villagers, attended the session. On 9 April 1990, the FEDRA workers and SBGA leaders organised a meeting in Village 2 to discuss the experience of a group of soya bean growers who worked in the agri-business project of the CP company in San Pa Tong district. The soya bean growers of Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts were made aware that the San Pa Tong soya bean growers had organised a collective protest for the next day to tackle the problem of falling soya bean prices. It was up to the soya bean producers of Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts to decide whether they would join the San Pa Tong growers’ protest.³⁴

³² FEDRA, 1990 (2533), “Sarup lamdap hetkan khwam klu’anwai phu’a kaekhai panha ra-kha thualu’ang” [A Summary of Chronological Events in the Movement for Solving the Problem of Soya Bean Price Decline], [in Thai], Chiang Mai. Interview, INT-035-VIL, 25 November 1992, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai; Interview, INT-085-NGO, 15 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. Associate Professor Aree Wiboonwongse from the Multi-Cropping Centre (MCC) of Chiang Mai University told me that the future of soya bean produce was unlikely to be rosy due the competitive price of agricultural product in the international markets (Interview, INT-126-ACA, 20 February 1993, Chiang Mai).

³³ Interview, INT-116-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

³⁴ FEDRA, 1990 (2533), “Sarup lamdap hetkan...”.

Exercising political power to demand a fair share

On 11 April 1990, about 50 soya bean growers from 4 districts (Mae Rim, Mae Taeng, San Sai and Chomthong), including some from Village 2, came to join the protest of 500 growers which had started on 10 April 1990 in front of Dhammachai Temple in San Pa Tong district. The protest, led by a sub-district head and a local politician from the Chat Thai Party – Songsuk Phakkasem – demanded that local officials ask the central government to solve the problem of falling soya bean prices. To prompt the government to respond urgently to their problem, the leaders of the protest and NGO workers decided to use the SBGA as the spearhead to unite the protest and negotiate with the government. However, the SBGA needed to be restructured to lead the movement of soya bean growers. After selecting a village head from Mae Taeng district as the president, and a village leader, Saen, from Village 2 as secretary-general, the SBGA launched its first declaration opposing the government's decision to permit the import of soya bean residue and demanding that the government compensate the growers for loss of income.³⁵

Dr Subin Pinkhayan, a local MP from the Social Action Party (SAP), who was also Minister of Commerce in the Chatchai government, could not ignore the soya bean growers' protest. On 21 April 1990, he invited representatives of the soya bean producers, a provincial Commerce Ministry official and Songsuk Phakkasem to his Chiang Mai house to discuss ways of addressing the problem. The meeting ended with two proposals. The short-term solution was for the Minister to ask the Public Warehouse Organisation, which was under his ministerial control, to buy soya bean from local producers at a price which covered their cost of investment. The long-term solution was for the Minister to ask the Office of Agricultural Economics in Bangkok to find out the exact cost of soya bean production and to submit to the cabinet a recommendation for further consideration and support.³⁶ On 22-23 April 1990, the SBGA leaders and NGO workers also surveyed the cost of soya bean production in Mae Rim and Mae Taeng districts so that they could obtain at least a rough figure to compare with the government's.

As a new productive season came closer, most growers desperately needed to know the government's decision and whether they would receive adequate income for the soya bean they had stored pending an improvement in the price. Towards the end of April 1990, they still had not received any information or seen any action from the Minister on the issue. However, many growers were forced to sell their soya bean at the prevailing price, first because it would not keep much longer due to the humidity, and

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

secondly because a new season was approaching and they needed the income to invest in a new crop. They sold their soya bean to CP company at 8 baht per kg even though the price barely covered the cost of production. On 29 April 1990, over 1,000 farmers demonstrated in front of Thaphae Gate demanding urgent resolution by the government of the problem of the decline in soya bean prices.³⁷ The demonstration was led by the SBGA with the support of NGOs from the local, provincial, regional and national levels including FEDRA, NDWA, UCL and NGO-CORD. The protesters and NGOs decided to send 38 leaders of the soya bean growers from different districts to Bangkok to meet Phong Sarasin, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chairperson of the Food Policy Committee. Ten leaders, including the SBGA committee members, met the Deputy Prime Minister in person. As a result of the discussion, he invited six leaders of the SBGA to attend the Food Policy Committee meeting – which was composed of the representatives from government (Department of Internal Trade, Ministry of Commerce) and business (e.g. the representative from the animal food companies' association) – to negotiate on the soya bean price. The representatives from the soya bean growers, officials and business were all satisfied with the outcome of the negotiations. As a result the government agreed to ask the Public Warehouse Organisation to buy soya bean from the domestic growers at 9 baht per kg and to reduce the import quota from 300,000 to 80,000 tons.³⁸

Encountering a setback in the people's organisation

The SBGA committee and NGO workers considered that the government's decision was temporary only and that the same problem would re-emerge the following year. Consequently, they planned to mobilise the growers in February 1991 to demand a subsidy from the government for soya bean producers. However, following the coup of 23 February 1991, the NGO workers and village leaders were cautious about political action. They, therefore, had to find a different approach to win government support for an agricultural subsidy for soya bean growers who had been affected by the government's accession to the GATT.

One approach was to use an element of traditional culture to seek assistance from the Provincial Governor. During the *Songkran*, the Thai traditional New Year festival, in April 1991, a group of SBGA leaders and NGO workers went with the Chiang Mai people to join the *rotnam damhua* ceremony held to bless the Governor.³⁹ While blessing the Governor with fresh and fragrant water, the SBGA leaders and NGO representatives brought to his attention the plight of soya bean growers resulting from

³⁷ *Daily News*, 30 April 1990 (2533).

³⁸ *Thai Rat*, 1 May 1990 (2533).

³⁹ This ceremony is practiced by the Northern Thais during the traditional New Year.

the government's free trade policies. The Governor agreed to take up the issue on the growers' behalf.

The Provincial Governor asked the Deputy Provincial Governor to hold discussions with the representatives of soya bean growers, provincial officials and business agents in Chiang Mai.⁴⁰ The outcome of the meeting was that the Deputy Provincial Governor agreed to ask the Minister of Commerce in the first interim Anan government (February 1991-April 1992) to subsidise the soya bean producers. After waiting for some time, the representatives of the soya bean growers went to Bangkok themselves to submit a petition to the government. The Bangkok-based NGOs, namely the NGO-CORD headquarter and the Thai Development Support Committee (TDSC), helped the representatives to carry out their task.⁴¹ The caretaker government could not deliver any promises before a new government took office after the national election (planned for March 1992), but agreed to pass on the request.

The Samakkhitham Party won the 1992 national election. However, when Narong Wongwan, the leader of the Party, was unable to succeed as the Prime Minister-elect because of drug trafficking accusations made by the US government, General Suchinda, a NPKC leader who did not contest the election, stepped in to become the Prime Minister. When the urban middle class, especially in Bangkok, began to protest against the return of the military leader to power,⁴² Suchinda sought political support from people and organisations outside Bangkok. One such organisation was the SBGA in Chiang Mai.

During the April and May 1992 Bangkok protests, Suchinda offered 60 million baht from the Collective Fund for Assisting Agriculturalists (*ko:ngthun songsoem kasetthako:n*) to subsidise the falling price of soya bean for that year. The secretary-general of the SBGA (from Village 2) and FEDRA fieldworkers, however, claimed that the money offered was a political ploy to keep the military in power. They also argued that the money would not reach small-scale producers because they had already sold their crop in April for six to 8 baht per kg. The 60 million baht offered by Suchinda would, however, benefit the owners of warehouse and agricultural companies who saw

⁴⁰ Representatives included the Deputy himself, Provincial Extension Officer, Provincial Agricultural Cooperative Officer, Provincial Commerce Officer and representatives from the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), the Provincial Joint Public and Private Consultative Committee and the Provincial Commerce Association.

⁴¹ FEDRA, 1991 (2534), "Sarup hetkan khwam klu'anwai kho:ng kasettakho:n phu pluk thualu'ang pi 1991 (2534)" [A Summary of Events in the Movement of Soya Bean Farmers in 1991], [in Thai], Chiang Mai.

⁴² See the background of the 1992 May event in *The Canberra Times*, 20 May 1990, pp. 1, 8, 9, 12 and 13; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1992, pp. 10, 12 and 21 May 1992, p. 8; *The Economist*, 23-29 May 1992, p. 15; *FEER*, 28 May 1992, pp. 10-11 and 12; *Bangkok Post*, 29 November 1992, p. 19.

the value of their stocks rise to 9 or 10 baht per kg.⁴³ At the same time, the SBGA president and the local politician from Chat Thai Party did not want to support the demonstration against Suchinda for fear of losing the 60 million baht subsidy. The situation was complicated by the secretary-general's claim that the president of the SBGA and his associates (including a local official and businessmen) had built a warehouse to stock 700 tons of soya bean bought from small-scale producers at low prices (6 to 8 baht per kg) whilst the SBGA and NGOs were demanding the government subsidy (which would raise the price to around 9 or 10 baht per kg).⁴⁴

In 1992, the internal disputes among SBGA leaders caused a serious setback for the wider soya bean growers' movement, which was led by the SBGA. Moreover, some officials, especially a provincial extension officer, tried to discredit the SBGA and accused it of being an "illegal association" (*chomrom thu'an*).⁴⁵ Due to internal disputes, the SBGA lost the support of its grass-roots members. Nevertheless, the FEDRA Chairperson felt obliged to intervene and to reorganise the SBGA. As the handicraft cooperative run by female villagers had proved successful, the Chairperson asked FEDRA fieldworkers to restructure the SBGA into a cooperative which, he believed, would benefit ordinary producers. During my second period of fieldwork, from October 1992 to March 1993, the cooperative had just started with thirteen villages loosely organised.

With the SBGA's reform introduced by the Chairperson, there emerged internal tensions within FEDRA. The young fieldworkers – especially Phithak (the head of the FEDRA Agricultural Promotion Unit) who had encouraged a political approach of the SBGA – did not agree with the new approach of the Chairperson and were frustrated by some administrators who strongly preferred a non-political approach. Phithak resigned from FEDRA but still continued assisting FEDRA on an occasional basis because of his strong attachment to the monk.⁴⁶ The remaining fieldworkers had not yet understood how to analyse local situations in accordance with changes in the political economy of rural Thailand. They tended to adopt a non-political approach fearing that any political action would tarnish the image of the FEDRA Chairperson, who was a senior monk in Chiang Mai.

⁴³ *Phujatkan*, 15 June 1992 (2535) and 20-21 June 1992 (2535).

⁴⁴ *Phujatkan*, 24 June 1992 (2535).

⁴⁵ My observation from attending a meeting between villagers, officials and FEDRA workers on 15 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. See also *Phujatkan*, 11 December 1992 (2535).

⁴⁶ He had been given free education at the Metta Suksa School which was established by the FEDRA Chairperson. After he finished his BA (Political Science) from Chiang Mai University in the early 1980s, he came to work with the Chairperson to help him develop rural communities.

In early 1993, Village 2 encountered a new problem of water scarcity resulting partly from the spread of agricultural intensification and commercialisation and partly as a legacy of forest depletion. FEDRA workers were busy organising the soya bean growers' cooperative while doing little to address the immediate problem of water scarcity.⁴⁷ During my stay in Village 2 in early 1993, I found small-scale cultivators were frustrated by competition over the use of forest and water resources between themselves, the landless and illegal loggers. They were also frustrated by the falling price of cash crops and the high cost of investment. Some cultivators began to sell their land to investors of capital – a situation which a village head described as “heartbreaking” (*na jai hai*).⁴⁸ Other cultivators felt hostile towards the landless, who they claimed earned their living by cutting trees illegally. Thus, they tried to convince the landless to work in factories somewhere outside the village.

In summary, the SBGA set up by soya bean growers with the help of FEDRA suffered setbacks due to internal conflicts among its leaders and their loss of touch with grass-roots members. The FEDRA Chairperson intervened to reformulate the SBGA in the form of a cooperative, expecting that this would win back the participation of the ordinary producers. The move of the Chairperson disappointed some young active fieldworkers who considered that FEDRA was seeking to avoid involvement in any political orientation. Some of them quit FEDRA leaving inexperienced workers to carry on the task of reforming the SBGA, a task which was to challenge FEDRA's grass-roots analysis and organisational direction. It was also to challenge the FEDRA workers' ability to produce a new social meaning and thus to regain the participation of ordinary people.

Discussion

Transformation, competition and intervention

Of the three villages under study, the agrarian change in Village 2 is the most advanced in terms of intensification and commercialisation. Here, the villagers have experienced agrarian change since the late 1930s. The main influences for change were a prince from Chiang Mai, a local MP, and private entrepreneurs with the support of government

⁴⁷ The village committee sought financial support from the Land Development Department in early 1993 to build a weir to store water for irrigating their crops. The weir was built in that year. However, in September 1994, the weir collapsed during heavy rain damaging 30 houses and destroying crops in the eastern lowland of the village. *Athit Weekly*, 30 September-6 October 1994, pp. 24-25. A former village head told me during my visit in October 1996 that the Land Development Department helped pay compensation.

⁴⁸ Interview, INT-108-VIL, 25 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

policies as detailed in a series of five-year development plans which have promoted the role of entrepreneurs in creating the wealth of the nation.

In the period up to the mid-1980s, the competition over access to productive resources in Village 2 was mainly related to access to land and to labour inputs (especially buffalos) resulting in problems from increasing rents for land and buffalos. Tensions emerged between landowners (mostly small-scale cultivators), tenants and landless peasants on the issue of high buffalo and land rents; between small-scale cultivators and middlemen on the reduced prices for agricultural outputs; between small-scale cultivators and agricultural business companies on increased prices for agricultural inputs; and among small-scale cultivators in search of a source of capital investment.

The attempt by student activists to intervene in the competition over access to land in Village 2 by recruiting the people to participate in the formation of the PFT failed. In fact, the students were not wrong in identifying rent as an issue or in arguing there was an increasing problem of social differentiation in the Thai society. They simply did not identify their target group and approached the wrong group of people in the village. “If the students went to ask tenants, a fight between the tenants and landowners would have occurred”, a former village head told me.⁴⁹ Poor peasants recalled little about the students’ presence in the village although they said they had heard vaguely about the movement of “those who favoured [commun]ism” (*phuak hoe latthi*) existing in some lowland villages of Mae Rim district.⁵⁰ Having little knowledge about Thai agrarian society, the students came to the village armed with general perceptions about a structural analysis and class conflict but could not identify the differences in a locality – especially the complicated social relations among rural people, between the people and other social actors. In looking for “landlords” they failed to identify the different levels of land ownership and the social relations in Village 2. Like other social movements elsewhere in the 1970s, the Thai social activists saw “a system without actors”.⁵¹

Ten years later in 1984 when FEDRA came to the village on the invitation of *Pho:luang* Wan to help the tenants, the FEDRA Chairperson sought to intervene by helping to set up the buffalo and rice banks for the landless. However, he believed that economic assistance alone was not enough and there was a need for spiritual development as well. He tried to use the notion of the buffalo being saved from slaughter as a “tool kit”, or “*yu’a*” as he called it, to educate the people, both rich and poor, and to create a social meaning of *metta* (loving-kindness) so as to teach the

⁴⁹ Interview, INT-116-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁰ Interview, INT-115-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵¹ Touraine, 1995, *Critique of Modernity*, p. 354.

responsibility to alleviate suffering in all life, animal and human. However, his message seldom reached those people. As one villager explained:

The projects of buffalo and rice banks includes both ethics (*khunnatham*) and stratagem (*ubai*) which encourage alms-giving (*kan hai than*) between the rich and the poor. Nevertheless, these two groups have not yet understood both the ethics and the stratagem of the projects. They need somebody who understands the essence of Dhamma to interpret the meaning and practice of alms-giving in relation to the projects and discuss with them.⁵²

When the spiritual development and social meaning message of caring for and of helping those who are suffering was lost, the NGO projects retained their objective of promoting economic development in line with government objectives. A villager compared the government's policies and NGO projects and felt that the NGO projects should have the added dimension of social meaning:

Government policies encouraged every citizen to strive for "good living; good eating" (*yu di kin di*). They did not urge us to acquire only "enough for a good life; enough to eat" (*yu pho:di kin pho:di*). No single government policy in the past tried to persuade us to see the significance of protecting the environment and to live with it in harmony. At the same time, FEDRA taught us about how to produce this crop that crop. Yet it has not taught us about when and where should be "enough" (*ru jak im jak pho:*).⁵³

The FEDRA projects also had the problem that they missed their target group – the landless. Two landless tenants told me that they did not have access to the rice bank project because, they claimed, the small-scale producers who ran the committees did not allow them to borrow paddy because they were not project members. They said that they earned hand-to-mouth income daily and, thus, could not afford to contribute an amount of paddy to the rice bank each year. They argued that the FEDRA project came to "help the rich get richer" (*chuai khon ruai tik tik*).⁵⁴ A retired teacher who was also a traditional and religious village leader (called *kae wat*) confirmed this opinion. He claimed that an "oligarchy" (referring to the village committee) controlled village resources and rarely delivered to those who were most in need.⁵⁵

Another significant pressure on the villagers throughout the 1980s was the cost of agricultural investment to grow crops such as soya bean, tobacco, green bean and pigeon pea. This was reaching the point where the landless could not afford to invest and take the risk of becoming permanently indebted.⁵⁶ Many of the landless, therefore, became wage workers in factories outside the village and no longer participated in

⁵² Interview, INT-118-VIL, 28 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵³ Interview, INT-115-VIL, 27 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁴ Interview, INT-110-VIL, 26 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁵ Interview, INT-104-VIL, 23 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁶ Interview, INT-112-VIL, 26 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

agricultural activities.⁵⁷ There was also pressure on the small-scale producers to find adequate funds for investment. FEDRA's principle economic aim was to assist those who were engaged in agricultural production so as to maintain village integrity. The small-scale producers in Village 2 wished to maintain their farming activities and needed FEDRA to provide further assistance through the revolving fund. As FEDRA workers became more involved in assisting small-scale producers, they were dealing with a system of social relations with which they were not familiar.

From the mid-1980s, the competition and tensions over productive resources in Village 2 occurred on several fronts and the scope of the problem was wider than in the past. The competition and tensions were between small-scale cultivators and middlemen on the issue of agricultural price; between small-scale cultivators and business companies (animal food factories), and government decision makers (Ministry of Commerce and the Food Policy Committee); between leaders within the SBGA; and between SBGA leaders and grass-roots members. FEDRA helped address some of these problems but was eventually troubled by the emergence of tensions within the organisation itself.

The FEDRA fieldworkers intervened in the competition between small-scale producers and middlemen on the issue of the selling and buying price of agricultural produce. Initially, as the small-scale cultivators of Village 2 were maintaining their social and cultural practices, FEDRA fieldworkers were able to intervene by developing what they saw as "community culture" as a means of gaining the "people's participation" to achieve higher prices from the middlemen for soya bean. Their success convinced other villagers from different places, who also saw the advantage of collective over individual action, to participate in similar collective action. The time was ripe, therefore, for the FEDRA workers to intervene further by setting up the SBGA in the period when the villagers enjoyed good profits from selling soya bean produce; also, as many officials in Mae Rim district agreed, Village 2 was a place where villagers generally had unity (*samakkhi*), religious values (*khunnatham*), a strong sense of belonging to their community and carefully selected leaders who brought benefits to their community. They were thus able to play an interventionist role in the formulation of the SBGA.

When the soya bean price fell, however, FEDRA could not come up with an effective solution, especially as the tension now extended to include the small-scale soya bean growers, business companies at the national level and government decision makers who had to comply with the GATT free trade agreement and, at the same time, compromise with the domestic business companies (in this case the animal food producers'

⁵⁷ Interview, INT-136-NGO, 26 February 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. FEDRA projects had to be ceased in some areas because many villagers sold their land out and gave up farming occupation.

association). In the first year (1990), the collective protest led by the SBGA was successful because the Chatchai government saw that the change of its policy was at the expense of domestic soya bean growers. However, after the victory in 1990, the unity of the SBGA began to weaken as some villagers became involved in growing other cash crops, such as green bean, potato and eggplant, in the form of contract farming with agri-business companies. As the villagers shifted to the new cash crops, they were entering into a new network of social and economic relations. In so doing, the villagers argued that they had no better alternative. In the second year (1991), the national politics changed when the civilian Chatchai government was overthrown. The interim government could not make a decision in response to the demand of the SBGA and by the third year (1992), internal conflicts had emerged within the SBGA committee due to alleged corruption by the SBGA president. As the grass-roots members were by now exhausted by the collective protests and disillusioned by the alleged misconduct of the president, they simply turned away from the SBGA.

This is not an unusual phenomenon for any social movement which is generally made up of organisational leaders and of grass-roots members. Those who are involved in collective action are not entirely equipped with “class consciousness”.⁵⁸ Some of them may wish to obtain only limited advantages from a collective protest, such as the increased price of agricultural product, leadership of a political movement as a stepping stone to becoming a local politician, and so forth. The political movement led by the SBGA is not exceptional. The problems faced by a political movement in response to a crisis situation need to be analysed by those concerned to get around the problems in the future. As a FEDRA fieldworker concluded: “No matter where a development project is started up, it is essential that NGO workers have a vision to direct it to serve the people”.⁵⁹ I think this rationale should be consistently used to reassess the substance of development concepts and practice.

In summary, FEDRA was successful in playing an interventionist role because it was able to capture social relations and tensions emerging during social practices. It was also able to help set up the Soya Bean Growers’ Association, a people’s organisation, with the expectation that it would help villagers to strengthen themselves in the long run. However, some growers moved to other cash crops and political events interfered in the campaign for better prices. Finally, tensions between the SBGA leaders and grass-roots members meant that FEDRA had to re-analyse the situation to find a new meaning and identify the new actors and networks. Before the members of the SBGA drifted apart, the FEDRA Chairperson intervened to reformulate the SBGA into an agricultural cooperative, a move which received full support from concerned officials at

⁵⁸ Touraine, 1977, *The Self-Production Society*, p. 317.

⁵⁹ Interview, INT-085-NGO, 15 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

the Northern Agricultural Office who were content to see the grass-roots members held together and their interests represented.

Some issues for further attention

FEDRA has been working with rural people in Mae Rim and many other districts in Chiang Mai province since 1974. In 1993, it had seventeen fieldworkers conducting rice banks, buffalo banks, revolving funds and other development projects in about 30 villages in three provinces of Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Mae Hong Son. Many workers were the former students of the Metta Suksa School which the FEDRA Chairperson established before his involvement with FEDRA. Receiving free education and welfare, the students felt attached to the Chairperson although some disagreed with his analysis of the causes of transformation and negative impact of change in the villages. The disagreements in social analysis caused tensions within FEDRA.

First, it always emerges from discussion on development that transformation and its negative impact results from either human conduct or the constraints of social and political structure. The FEDRA fieldworker also felt that they had a communication gap with their administrators. They wanted the FEDRA administrators, most of whom were urban middle class, to understand the harsh impact of current development and change on the livelihood of villagers, many of whom were forced off their land and lost their property. They also wanted them to help them tackle problems which they perceived to be imposed by structural constraints. However, other FEDRA workers and administrators disagreed with this approach, arguing that political actions would tarnish the reputation of the FEDRA Chairperson. While the competition over productive resources intensified in the early 1990s, the active FEDRA fieldworkers felt frustrated, as they perceived that FEDRA was becoming inflexible in response to the people's crucial situations, such as the falling price for soya (Village 2) and the land dispute between military and villagers (Village 3). One fieldworker bluntly criticised FEDRA for putting the problem of the projects ahead of the people:

The situations required FEDRA to help solve the people's problem, not the buffalo bank's problem. What FEDRA had done so far was running around in the circle of starting up a development project, and managing and following up the project. Yet, it has not intensively assessed its past experiences in working with local people, officials and businessmen.⁶⁰

Secondly, while the FEDRA administrators put the emphasis on social integration, the FEDRA fieldworkers focused their work on social conflicts and movement. The FEDRA Chairperson disapproved of political protest, due to his personal character and

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Interview, INT-034-NGO, 25 November 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

training as a monk.⁶¹ He was more inclined to look for social integration than to be sensitive to social conflicts and movements initiated by social actors. Meanwhile, FEDRA fieldworkers who dealt with competition and conflicts over productive resources in everyday phenomena were more alert to the potential for social tension than the FEDRA administrators. It seems to me that FEDRA needs to review relations between its administrators and staff members and to consider organisational reform if it is to attract young active workers with a commitment to work with local people. FEDRA also needs to review its interaction with its network to maximise its potential to respond to problems which it may be unable to handle on its own.

Thirdly, as the collective protest led by the SBGA in 1992 faced internal conflicts between SBGA leaders and grass-roots members, it needed NGOs to investigate the problematic relations within a social movement arising from collective activity and crises in a given situation. In so doing, the NGOs might discover a new social meaning, new social actors and a new direction for organisational reform, rather than see the disintegration of the movement.

Finally, the occupants of Village 2 felt concern about the ecological system of their village which is located partly on highlands in the west and partly on lowlands in the East. In this situation, FEDRA needed to consider not only the relations between humans, but also between humans and their environment.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has discussed, from the different events in Village 2, rural transformation and the intervention of social actors, especially FEDRA and its networks, in the competition and conflicts over productive resources (high rents on land and buffalo, as well as the cost of agricultural investment). Before the mid-1980s, competition emerged between landowners (most of whom were small-scale cultivators) and tenants on the issue of high rents for land and for buffalos, which were beyond the capacity of tenants to afford. At the same time, small-scale cultivators were competing with middlemen and agri-business companies and receiving low prices for their agricultural products, while paying a high cost for agricultural investment. To tackle these problems, a village leader invited FEDRA to implement certain development projects. Buffalo and rice bank projects helped reduce tenants' accumulating debts. Having seen the tenants benefiting from FEDRA projects, the small-scale landowners began to seek FEDRA assistance. But, in addressing the competition between small-scale producers

⁶¹ Interview, INT-008-ACA, 30 October 1991, Chiang Mai.

and middlemen on the issue of low prices for agricultural products, FEDRA shifted its focus from tenants to small-scale cultivators, as its main target group.

From the mid-1980s, FEDRA had become involved with small-scale cultivators who still carried on their traditional culture while adapting some “modern” aspects into their daily life. FEDRA fieldworkers played an interventionist role by helping the small-scale cultivators to create the social meaning of “unity” and “self-reliance” based on the people’s practice of their “community culture”, thus demonstrating the people’s ‘power’ to enhance their profit with middlemen. The small victory of the producers in Village 2 encouraged other growers from different districts to become involved in forming the organisation of soya bean producers, the SBGA, to represent their interest. In 1990, FEDRA workers, their NGO networks such as NDWA and NGO-CORD, and other supporters in Chiang Mai helped the SBGA members scale-up from a village community to tackle the problem of falling soya bean prices at a national level. The scale-up action was not a pre-planned strategy but arose from the links between NGO workers, organisations and networks on a particular issue and situation.

Some key factors influenced small-scale cultivators to move away from soya bean production and to engage in other cash crops and contract farming. First, while the soya bean price continued to fall in subsequent years, SBGA members and NGO workers seemed to be exhausted by collective protest activities. Secondly, the military coup in February 1991 made protesters uncertain about the future of the open-political system in Thailand. Thirdly, the prospect of domestic soya bean production did not look good because it could not compete with cheaper soya bean on the international market and, more importantly, the Thai government would have to comply with the GATT. Fourthly, some SBGA committee members and NGO workers were committed to political means to solve the problem and lost touch with grass-roots members. Fifthly, internal conflicts among SBGA leaders caused a split in the people’s organisation. As small-scale cultivators moved further into the agricultural intensification of contract farming, they encountered the new problem of water scarcity. During this time, two FEDRA fieldworkers resigned. Thus, FEDRA had to leave the new problem in the hands of village leaders to handle by themselves. FEDRA had been busy restructuring the SBGA into a cooperative. Whether the cooperative could engage the participation of grass-roots members depended on whether FEDRA could create a social meaning acceptable to the members while interacting with other social actors in the development process.



Plate 9. Villagers planting rice for mainly household consumption.



Plate 10 Harvesting tobacco (Virginia Richmond) after completion of the rice season.



Plate 11. The FEDRA Chairperson conducting an almsgiving ceremony between a donor and recipient of oxen (for the buffalo bank project).



Plate 12 Well-to-do urban couple handing over an ox to a female peasant.

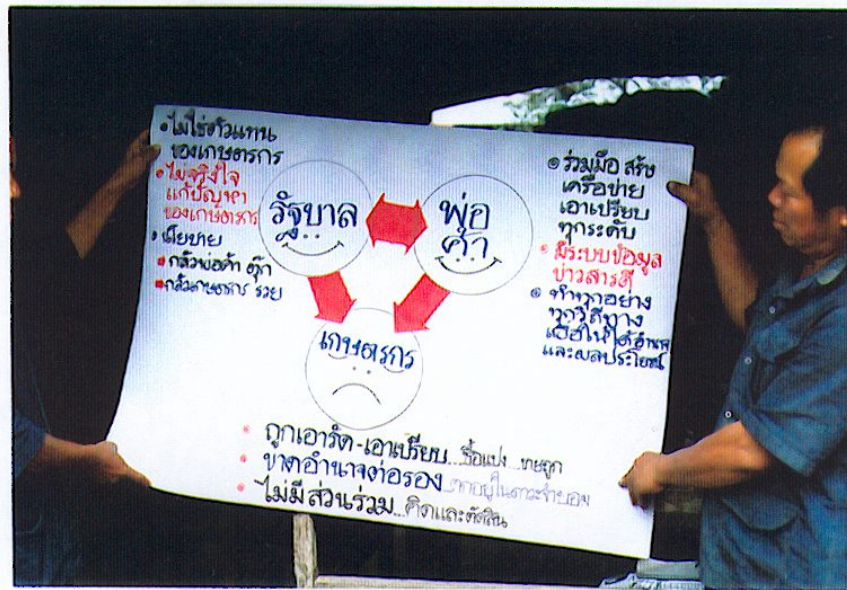


Plate 13 Soya bean growers' analysis of the asymmetrical power relations between the government, merchants (traders) and peasants.

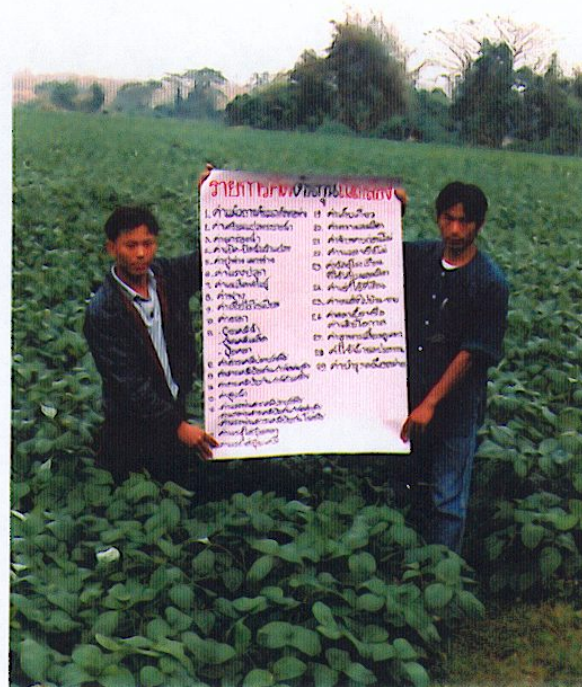


Plate 14 Villagers showing the 29 items which contribute to the cost of soya bean production.



Plate 15. Protest in front of the Thaphae Gate, Chiang Mai, against the government's decision to allow the import of soya bean residue and the resultant fall in price on the domestic market.



Plate 16 Soya bean growers signal their victory after the government agreed to set the domestic price they demanded.