

Chapter 4

Cooperation to manage natural resources in a forest-fringe village

Any process of democratic transformation must necessarily take into account this difference between the structures of representation and the demands or interests of the represented: a project of democratisation intended to be 'progressive' or 'radical' is forced to imagine the social and political means of controlling this difference.

A. Melucci¹

When people-centred NGOs began their work in the early 1980s, their general attention was given to the promotion of agricultural development in favour of the rural poor (e.g. small-scale and landless peasants). Although the NGOs had been aware for some time of environmental degradation resulting in part from the increase of agricultural commercialisation, the environment as such did not become a focus of their attention until the late 1980s. This chapter aims to investigate the interventionist role played by NGOs as they responded, on behalf of the villagers, to emerging competition over forest, land and water resource use between villagers, officials and private entrepreneurs. It also looks at the impact on village livelihood and local environment of this competition which has been a consequence of the significant economic and social changes taking place in Thailand in the past twenty years.

The chapter focuses on the development work of four NGOs in a forest-fringe village northwest of Chiang Mai during the 1980s. It describes the changes occurring in the village which have resulted in villagers becoming more involved in agricultural commercialisation over time. As a consequence of this, the competition between villagers and other parties over access to village resources has escalated. This has also meant that greater pressure has been put on villagers to achieve a livelihood through expanded production. At the same time, it has put increased pressure on the environment. The chapter traces the activities of four NGOs in the selected village with particular attention to their response to the growing competition over resources and environmental issues, and describes the NGOs' attempts to use people's participation and community culture concepts in formulating projects to assist the villagers to maintain their livelihoods. The study identifies a number of actors who have interests in the village resources and who, in various ways, compete for access to them. These include outside commercial interests and government officials as well as local entrepreneurs and villagers. Finally, it discusses the role that the NGOs have played in

¹ Melucci, 1988, "Social Movements and the Democratisation...", p. 252.

relation to the various actors in the competition over natural resources through their programmes of assistance to the villagers.

The chapter argues that the NGOs are less likely to relieve competition over resources when they introduce externally designed programmes than when they have come to understand local politics, cultures and situations in accordance with current changes in the national political economy. When the NGOs recognise the shortcomings of their own development approaches and the different interests of actors from different organisations (or places of origin) in the competition over resources, they are more likely to use social and political means to handle the differences. The study will show that the NGOs have played an interventionist role in helping the villagers of Village 1 to formulate a natural resource management plan in a watershed area. However, some issues emerging from the study suggest that it is necessary for the NGOs to go beyond their bipolar systems of thought to search for the “the third space” in analysing the relations between the state and village, between everyday politics and collective action, between traditional and modern farming methods.

Village context

Village 1 is located about 40 km northwest of Chiang Mai city. It was settled by a small group of migrants from different lowland villages in 1963 but only officially recognised as a village (*muban*) in 1982. The village is at an altitude of about 500 to 600 metres and lies in a small valley surrounded by partially degraded forest. Access is by a rough laterite feeder road linked to the Chiang Mai-Fang highway. The road is difficult for vehicles to negotiate especially in the rainy season. There is a Lua village about 4 km higher up the mountain in what the RFD classifies as *phu'nti kan o:k*, or “excised area”, because the Lua village had existed there long before the Forest Conservation Act 1964 was enacted.² Under the Act, the Lua were able to have land title deeds on the basis of their long-term occupation and use of the land. However, the people of Village 1 were outside the excised area and were only able to use degraded forest for settlement and cultivation by agreement with forestry officials but without the possibility of legal ownership. The RFD considered that Village 1 was located in a watershed area of the Mae Rim Conservation Forest.

² An “excised area” is determined according to Ministerial Rule No. 12, B.E. 2507 (1964) issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, under the Forest Conservation Act of 1964.

For general knowledge about the Lua and their relations with the Northern Thais and with the environment, see P. Kunstadter and S.L. Kunstadter, 1992, “Population Movement and Environmental Changes in the Hills of Northern Thailand”, in G. Wijeyewardene and E.C. Chapman, *Patterns and Illusions: Thai History and Thought*, Department of Anthropology, RSPAS, ANU, pp. 17-56.

In the early 1990s, the population of Village 1 was a little over 100. As shown in Map 4.1, it comprised about 30 households located along the village road compared to about 20 households in the mid 1980s.³ The villagers farmed about 300 rai of land, one quarter of which was made up of small lowland parcels in the valley floor while the rest was on steep slopes and forest.⁴ From the early to mid 1980s, each family occupied about 2-3 rai of lowland and up to 10 rai of upland for cultivation purposes. The villagers were small-scale cultivators; however, in the mid 1980s when the price of land boomed, many sold their right of land use (without any land title document) to private entrepreneurs from Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Two Bangkok entrepreneurs have since built their houses in Village 1. One is located near the school in the middle of the village. The other is situated between Village 1 and the Lua village. When I did my fieldwork in early 1993, most villagers had become wage workers employed by local forestry officials to cultivate a state-owned teak plantation nearby. They earned about 55 baht per day. Those who did not sell their land rights, struggled to cope with rapid economic and social changes and to maintain their livelihoods.

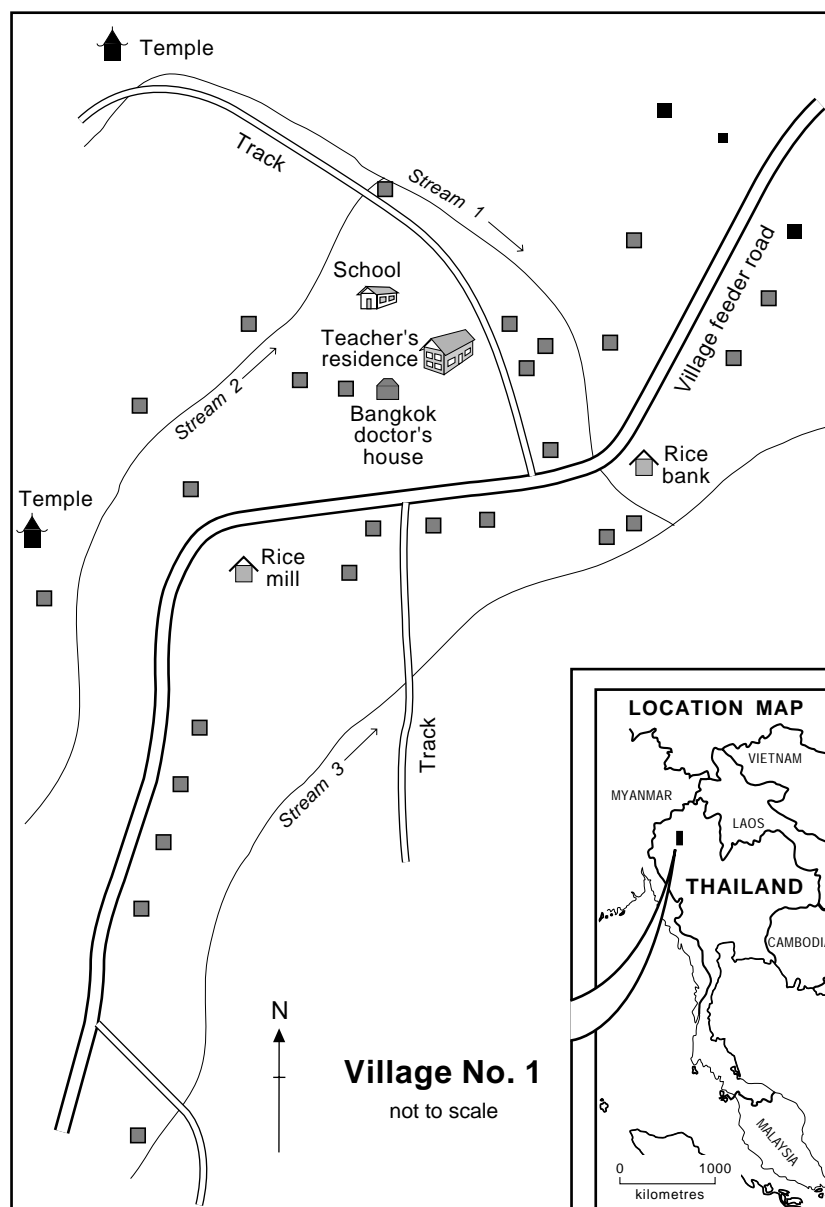
The site of Village 1 was once a camp for the employees of Thai Phatthana Logging company. Singha, the village founder, was a former worker with the company which had received a concession to cut timber in the Mae Rim forest in 1954. After finishing his contract with the firm, Singha came back to this area in 1963, cleared and occupied about 3 rai of low fertile land and about 30 rai of upland and initiated the village settlement. He urged relatives and friends from lowland villages nearby to come and settle with him. In 1965, six peasants who had either insufficient land to cultivate for household consumption, or had lost their lands for various reasons, moved up to the new village. In the 1970s, settlers came from other distant provinces such as Udon Thani, Buri Ram, Chachoengsao and Suphan Buri through various village connections. Such migration seems to have been common in Thailand, especially from the 1960s when land resources began to be squeezed by population growth and the expansion of agricultural commercialisation which forced rural populations to seek new land for cultivation.⁵ Settlers also came from other districts of Chiang Mai including a group of

³ Fieldwork in 1993; see also SRI, 1985 (2528), *Laksana thang setthakit sangkhom lae prachako:n amphoe mae rim jangwat chiang mai* [The Characteristics of Economy, Society and Population of Mae Rim District, Chiang Mai Province], [in Thai], Report No. 28-2-170, SRI, Chiang Mai University, Appendix, n.p.; Niphot Thianwihan, 1983 (2526), "Prasopkan thamngan phatthana kho:ng sun sangkhom phatthana sapha khattho:lic: Ko:rani suksa [village 1] chiang mai" [The Working Experience in Development of the Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC): A Case Study (Village 1), Chiang Mai], [in Thai], DISAC, Chiang Mai.

⁴ Also fieldwork in 1993. According to the SRI Report, in 1985 villagers farmed about 200 rai of both lowland and highland. It should be noted that this is an estimated figure because forestry officials have not yet surveyed the land in this village.

⁵ The history of settlement in Chiang Mai suggests that in the past, the people moved downward from the hills to the lowland for cultivation. However, in the 1960s, as occurred in Village 1, the people began to move back up to the hills to farm in degraded forest. See different natures of forest settlement in Hirsch, 1990, *Development Dilemmas in Rural Thailand*, chs 3 and 4; and

tribal people (four families) who sold their land in Mae Ai district cheaply for quick cash and moved to Village 1 in the mid 1980s.



Map 4.1 Village 1

The new settlers had close relations with the nearby Lua villagers. As well as learning productive skills and techniques of highland agriculture from the Lua, the new settlers shared natural resources (especially forest and water) with them. Before Village 1 was declared an independent village in 1982, the Lua village headmen had been asked by the District to administer and deliver social services (e.g. health and education) to the new settlers. Until the mid 1970s, there appeared to be harmony between the villages over the use of natural resources. This harmony gradually declined, however, when

other migrants including Hmong, Karen and Northern Thais moved into the watershed area to clear and occupy land at about 1,200 metres above the sea level. This was above the Lua village which is located about 800 metres above the sea level.

People who settled in Village 1 after 1965 told me that the forest had only become depleted after separation from the Lua village in 1982. Singha argued that the main reason for forest depletion was not due to the new settlers, who did not have powerful equipment to chop down trees, but rather, the forest was degraded by the logging companies' abuse of the forest resource and the negligence of some forestry officials who did not ensure that regulations were followed. He recalled that:

From 1965 to 1975 the forest was not yet degraded... Forestry officials initially came to mark the trees which they allowed to be cut down. Capitalists [literally translated from *naithun*] came after to supposedly cut down the marked trees. Without any inspection by the officials, the capitalists cut other trees including teaks which were not marked. Illegal loggers also brought in outsiders to cut and saw timber. By the time the village was [officially] established in the early 1980s, the forest was completely degraded.⁶

The main problem facing the settlers in the early years was that they could not produce enough rice for year-round consumption. This was not as a result of land shortage, forest degradation or other environmental problems. Singha claimed that even though the land was fertile, rice farming was difficult and not productive:

Our crops appeared with uncertain results. Some years were good. Some years were bad. We could not leave our farm to earn money elsewhere. We had to weed several times a year in the wet-rice fields and plant other crops to ensure our food sufficiency.⁷

This situation, which is typical for new rice land, continued into the early 1980s. Although the people tried to subsidise their food needs with income from cash crops and timber cutting, some still had to borrow paddy from nearby lowland villagers at interest rates of up to almost 90 per cent to meet their household consumption needs.⁸ Singha was afraid that if this situation continued the villagers might sell their land to pay off accumulating debt as he had seen occurring in many other lowland areas. He, therefore, sought a way to solve the problem of rice shortage and decided to explore setting up a "rice bank" which he had heard about from *phra thudong* (a monk who travelled to find a peaceful place, often in a forest, to practice meditation). Singha approached a number of organisations before DISAC finally agreed to set up a rice bank project. The village founder believed that the project would solve the rice shortage problem. However, at that time, there was still a great deal of mistrust of students and NGO workers by the military and bureaucrats who often suspected them of being part of the so called 'communist insurgency' problem in remote areas. The

⁶ Interview, INT-094-VIL, 19 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For example, for 10 thang of paddy borrowed, a ricelender asks for 18 to 20 thang to be returned. One thang of unhusked paddy grain is equal to approximately 20 litres or 10.1 kg.

political mistrust inevitably caused officials in Mae Rim district to be suspicious of DISAC workers and a group of Chiang Mai University students who had been invited to the village to build a school.

NGO involvement and activities

Linking handouts with participatory development

DISAC undertook an economic survey while setting up a rice bank project in Village 1. According to the DISAC report prepared by Fr Niphot in 1983, 13 out of 21 households farmed 2-3 rai of wet-rice, which was too small to produce enough rice for their year-round consumption. DISAC recorded that the villagers, therefore, grew sugar banana, jackfruit and chilli on the steep land nearby to earn a cash income to enable them to buy additional food and clothing. They also chopped down trees to make firewood and charcoal for sale. DISAC argued that environmental degradation was likely to increase in this village due to the fact that:

Every household which had young labour was engaged in cutting timber [illegally] to subsidise their cash income. Often, they cut timber to pay off their debt because they had no cash in hand.⁹

DISAC, nonetheless, felt obliged to respond to the villagers' urgent request for assistance to address the rice shortage problem. As it had done in other villages, DISAC offered eleven sacks of rice to start the rice project. Ten families were reluctant to join DISAC activities due to rumours claiming it was *khao kho:mmunit* ("communist rice") – a term used by villagers which arose from government propaganda designed to prevent rural people from supporting non-official individuals and groups which the government believed might help the expansion of communist influence in remote areas. However, eleven families did decide to join DISAC despite the government propaganda.

DISAC tried to link its assistance with a participatory development concept.¹⁰ It believed that the people should create and run their own 'development' by themselves instead of waiting for social-welfare handouts.¹¹ In practice, DISAC did not know how it should encourage the people to participate in their own development. It, therefore, asked the villagers to contribute to the rice bank. The participating villagers agreed to give either 2 thang of paddy or 60 baht cash and these contributions were used to buy

⁹ Niphot, 1983 (2526), "Prasopkan thamngan phatthana...", pp. 8-9 and 10.

¹⁰ See Chapter 3 for explanation.

¹¹ As many NGO workers say: "Give him a fish; he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish; he eats forever".

about 70-80 thang of paddy from the Lua village. The rice purchased was then put in the rice bank. At the first meeting, the villagers also agreed with DISAC to establish a village development committee composed of four members and chaired by Singha, to take care of the rice bank activities. In this way, DISAC believed it was linking the practice of handouts with participatory development.

However, applying the concept was difficult because social relations between actors are not only complex but also rapidly and constantly changing. In Village 1, two problems emerged to draw the participants away from the DISAC project. One was the on-going political suspicion existing between government and NGOs which made many villagers tentative about participation in the DISAC project. The other was the internal conflict between village leaders – Singha and Win – both of whom sought the village head position and consequently distracted the villagers from the real purpose of the DISAC project and introduced tension between local officials and NGO workers. Singha and Win hoped to win votes by calling on outsider support. Win, who was the acting ‘village head’ in the period before the village was formally established, sought the support of district head and other officials, whereas Singha hoped to gain support by acting as a traditional patron and defending the village livelihood through the implementation of a DISAC rice bank project.

Singha invited NGOs, academics and university students to help develop the village. After a group of Chiang Mai University students finished building a school, the villagers went to Mae Rim District Office (*thi wakan amphoe mae rim*) and asked the District Head to send a teacher to teach their children. The ‘development’ activities of villagers, students and NGO workers were, however, of concern to officials who suspected such activities were part of an alleged communist infiltration in rural areas. To put the village under government control, the District Head, therefore, allowed Village 1 to be formally established in 1982 even though there were fewer than the 40 households normally required.¹² However, Win became the first village head (locally called *Pho:luang* or *kae ban*) without serious competition as Singha was over the 60-year age limit set by the Local Administrative Act for formal headship. Win also worked as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the government in the village and sought to implement its laws and orders.

The rivalry between the two men discouraged people from participating in the rice bank project and made it difficult for DISAC to continue its presence in the village. As Chair of the development committee, Singha did not allow *Pho:luang* Win to join the rice bank even though he did not have sufficient rice for his family’s consumption. At the same time, however, Singha allowed his relatives and friends to borrow rice from the

¹² Interview, INT-092-VIL, 18 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

rice bank although they were not members and lived outside the village, regardless of the agreement that only members could borrow from the bank. As a result, Singha's management of the rice bank came under the scrutiny of its members. This eventually aggravated the tensions between villagers who, as migrants from different places, divided into factions. DISAC was quick to recognise this problem and tried to solve it by consultation with the villagers. At the same time, however, DISAC was facing severe financial problems which prevented it from engaging in further activities.¹³

This was a turbulent time in the village's history. It came to a head when the spirit of *Jaopho: Kaeo*, which the villagers believed was taking care of them, 'occupied' the body of a female villager and through her condemned the disunity and called for a change in behaviour. The tension between villagers lessened after the spirit expressed its concerns. The DISAC Director, Niphot, believed that the use of the spirit represented a revival of "community culture" in response to the divisions in the village. However, the spirit accused DISAC of causing the dispute and this made Niphot realise that there were some Buddhists who feared that the villagers might become Catholic if DISAC continued working in the village. Fr Niphot did not want to see religious rivalry develop and, therefore, invited FEDRA, a Buddhist organisation, to take over the village rice bank in 1982.

In summary, although DISAC was early in recognising that environmental problems would increase in this village if the villagers continued chopping down trees and exploiting forest land, it had, first and foremost, to respond to the villagers' immediate rice shortage problem. At that time, therefore, the environment was not a focus of NGO activities. The key development approaches articulated in the early 1980s by NGOs were to help the peasants cope with economic and social change by providing assistance in promoting agriculture and to strongly oppose the domination of the powerful 'state' over the village. Furthermore, the political situation of mistrust between the government and NGOs affected the relationship between the NGOs and the villagers (e.g. through the accusations of "communist rice"). As outsiders, the NGOs had to spend time finding ways to avoid tensions between themselves and the villagers before they could turn their attention to potential environmental degradation problems.

Attempting to help maintain village settlement in the forest

FEDRA's main development approach in this village was to cooperate with officials while trying to maintain its independence in decision makings. Unlike DISAC which attempted to strengthen the power of the traditional village leader (the village founder), FEDRA worked through official channels with the village head and stayed in touch

¹³ CCTD and CEBEMO, *Kan damrong yu kho:ng chumchon...*, pp. 36-37.

with more senior government executives. *Pho:luang* Win had to perform his duty properly for fear of being scrutinised by the district head. Singha became quiet due to the lack of external support. He was further limited and found it difficult to move around after having one leg amputated due to his illness from diabetes. As a result, the rivalry between Singha and *Pho:luang* Win declined.

While FEDRA administrators were accustomed to charitable handout approaches, some younger FEDRA fieldworkers were influenced by the concepts of “participatory development” and “community culture”. They applied these ideas in their development projects in the belief that such approaches would encourage villagers to live in harmony as a society and with the environment. While FEDRA outlined its main development principles and activities to the villagers, it also allowed space for the fieldworkers to be able to explore their development approaches. Initially, FEDRA wanted to ensure that villages stayed intact and people were not forced off their land. To ensure this, it believed that the villagers had to be able to meet their immediate needs and, to this end, FEDRA decided to continue with the DISAC rice bank project in Village 1.

In the first meeting between FEDRA representatives and interested villagers in 1983, the FEDRA Chairperson explained the Foundation’s main principles and why it supported projects such as rice banks, buffalo banks and revolving funds.¹⁴ He also addressed the particular situation of Village 1 and asked why there was a rice shortage and why they only grew one crop a year. Some in the meeting replied that because their lands were far away from village streams there was a water shortage in the dry season. They added, however, that they could solve the water supply problem by building a traditional irrigation system (*mu’ang fai*) if they had the financial resources. FEDRA subsequently lent 2,000 baht each from FEDRA’s revolving fund project to ten villagers to enable them to build a weir (*fai*) and dig a water channel (*lam mu’ang*) passing through their land. Knowing that FEDRA had a special budget to assist those who did not have capital for investment in agriculture, the villagers (including some who had already borrowed money to construct the weir), asked to borrow 1,000 baht each from FEDRA’s revolving fund project to expand their production of cash crops, such as soya bean, peanut and chilli, and to assist in raising pigs for sale. FEDRA provided loans with the agreement that the interest would be fed back into a village fund to be run by a new village development committee which FEDRA then helped to set up.

As with DISAC before it, FEDRA had already designed the development projects which villagers were urged to join, and this could not be called “participatory development” in a real sense. Although the revolving fund projects helped many to

¹⁴ See details in Vanpen, 1989, “Issues and Experiences in the Use of Community Participation...”, pp. 76-116.

stay out of serious debt because of its cheap interest rate (e.g. 10 per cent per year as compared to 60 per cent required by money lenders), the project also became a factor in people's encroachment on the conservation forest to grow more cash crops; a move not anticipated by FEDRA.¹⁵ This came about because villagers were looking for more than a subsistence existence, or even the self-sufficiency envisaged by FEDRA.

Recognising the rising tide of market economy in Village 1, Phithak – a FEDRA worker – believed this would lead to the bankruptcy of the villagers and FEDRA if they could not control the outcomes of the loan projects. He also feared the destruction of the local environment if the villagers continued to encroach on the forest for farming. Phithak, therefore, tried to persuade them to reduce household expenditure – which he hoped would minimise the farming in the forest – and suggested that they should maintain their “community culture” which he interpreted as the people living in harmony with one another and with nature as he believed they had in the past.¹⁶ To implement this approach, Phithak, with the agreement of a number of village women, brought a loom to the village and invited a teacher to teach weaving skills to the women. He hoped that the women would spend some time weaving each day after their work in the field to make clothes for their own domestic use and thereby reduce the need for money to purchase clothes. He was soon to be disappointed when he saw the loom was kept under a villager's house instead of being used. Phithak, therefore, reassessed his “community culture” approach given the reality in Village 1 where the migrants were struggling to keep up with increasing household expenditure (children's education, health, consumer goods and transport together with agricultural investment). He discovered that already in 1985 the villagers were spending about 10,000 to 12,000 baht per month for a five-member household located in this forest frontier. I was informed that the attempt to introduce weaving was not successful because the weaving was seen to be too slow and the women were not convinced that it would meet their needs. There was also quarrelling among the women on issues such as the provision of food and accommodation for the teacher and the care of the loom and equipment.¹⁷ The scheme failed because it did not take account of the real situation of migrant villagers who were trying to meet immediate needs.

FEDRA workers also soon began to realise that environmental problems, such as soil erosion and denuding of the forest, were the result of the villagers' increasing dependence on agricultural cash production in the forest. FEDRA then sought ways to

¹⁵ Prayat Jaturapho:nphithakkun, 1985 (2528), “Botrian jak ngoen thun mun wian: Suksa chapko:rani: Kandamnoennan muban samachik” [Lessons Learnt from the Revolving Fund Project: A Case Study of a Village Member's Working Process], [in Thai], Report presented to the TVS, Bangkok.

¹⁶ See Chapter 3 for explanation.

¹⁷ Interview, INT-096-VIL, 19 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

restrict this. It believed that a simple solution to the problem would be to maximise income from their existing land. ATA, an NGO whose development activity was the application of “appropriate technology” to help villagers increase their income, was interested in working in a highland village where there was already an NGO working on community participation activities.¹⁸ ATA expected to focus its effort on applying appropriate technology while the other NGO attended to social issues.

In 1985, ATA initiated a soya bean experiment with the people in Village 1 to maximise yields per rai, which they believed would help limit the amount of land in use.¹⁹ In 1986, ATA proposed a small hydropower plant be set up in order to generate electricity for Village 1. The proposal included the establishment of a rice mill for villagers to reduce the cost of milling and save time transporting rice to be milled outside the village, also an electric oven for drying soya bean so that it could be preserved for sale when the price was good.²⁰ The NGO workers (FEDRA and ATA) also discussed with villagers how they could reduce their expenditure and the logging in Mae Rim Conservation Forest. Both FEDRA and ATA recognised that the technological activities would cause economic and social change in this village. However, while they saw the positive side of generating income and expected this to achieve their objective of helping to maintain the village, they did not recognise the potentially negative side of such activities, namely, more consumer spending rather than saving and even greater pressures on the natural resources.

Villagers took turns to help two ATA engineers construct the small hydropower plant. This practice was regarded by the ATA as representing a “people’s participation” approach simply because villagers contributed labour and discussed some practical matters concerning the landscaping with the ATA engineers. The plant was installed in Village 1 in less than a year, even shorter than the time taken to set up a similar plant in the Lua village the previous year.²¹ However, not long after electricity was introduced, salesmen from the Chiang Mai city came to sell various kinds of consumer goods such

¹⁸ Appropriate Technology Association (ATA) identified Village 1 and, after doing a feasibility study, asked FEDRA for its cooperation. ATA had already received funding from the German NGO “Bread for the World” to set up a small hydropower plant to generate electricity in the Lua village and Village 1. See details in ATA, 1986 (2529), “Kansuksa saphap sangkhom wathanatham lae setthakit [lua village] amphoe mae rim jangwat chiang mai” [The Study Concerning Social, Cultural and Economic Conditions (Lua Village), Mae Rim District, Chiang Mai Province], [in Thai], Feasibility study for the utilisation of a Small Hydropower Project, ATA, Bangkok.

¹⁹ Interview, INT-128-NGO, 20 February 1993, Chiang Mai.

²⁰ Soya bean seeds could be damaged easily by humidity. Normally, villagers rush to sell them off. Because of this, the soya bean price was lowered by middlemen. If the soya bean seeds were dried, the villagers were able to choose to sell when the price was rising. In this regard, NGOs helped the villagers to have control over their resource and production.

²¹ See further details in Sirinporn Chate-thakul, 1990, “Micro-Hydropower Utilisation in Combination with the Heat Generator”, Evaluation Report, ATA, Bangkok.

as colour televisions, videos, stereos and even motorcycles. Some villagers began to buy on credit and, as a result, they immediately needed to earn substantially more cash to afford the goods and pay off debts. This in turn placed greater pressure on existing forest resources as the villagers turned to the forest for extra land for crops or to cut trees for sale.

Since the previous attempt to impose land registration on the villagers had failed, local forestry officials sought an alternative method to consolidate their control over the state forest. They decided to expand government teak plantations into degraded areas thereby establishing the state's control over the land and achieving reforestation. At the same time, they employed villagers as wage workers (55 baht a day) in the belief that this income opportunity would reduce the need to cut timber for cash. Many villagers were satisfied with this source of quick income. The officials also forbade any further forest encroachment and land transactions to private entrepreneurs with the threat that if these continued the villagers would have to be relocated out of the forest altogether.

As a result of this threat, village leaders and NGO workers invited the Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), an environmental NGO, to work in Village 1. The invitation suited PER which wanted to work on environmental problems in a forest-fringe area. The three NGOs (FEDRA, PER and ATA) decided to find a way in which the villagers could continue to live and survive in this village without damaging the forest environment. They wished to demonstrate to the forest officials that the villagers could help conserve the forest and should not be seen simply as agents of destruction. They also sought to help the villagers change their agricultural practice from intensification and commercialisation to more environmentally sensitive alley-cropping and mixed farming methods introduced by ATA and PER in 1986. This is what the NGOs called "alternative agriculture", a model which it hoped would prevent soil erosion and nutrient deficiency as well as creating a sustainable land use method.

Most villagers were reluctant to adopt the NGO techniques. A young peasant who had just started a family said that he could not afford the risk of the new techniques failing. He, therefore, preferred to wait and see whether the "alternative agriculture" approach worked before deciding to adopt the NGO methods.²² Singha, the village founder, claimed that the methods were "suitable for dry-land agriculture as in the northeast" but not for Village 1. He recalled that previously FEDRA had "lent money to some villagers to dig *mu'ang fai*".²³ Thus, Singha claimed that the land was no longer seen as dry land. However, two middle-income villagers – *Pho:luang* Pa, the new Village Head from 1989, and a son of the former village head, *Pho:luang* Win – agreed to apply

²² Interview, INT-093-VIL 18 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

²³ Interview, INT-094-VIL, 19 Jan 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

the NGO conservation techniques on approximately one-third of their land. In making this decision they were motivated largely by self-interest – they protected their land in the forest while showing forestry officials that they were making a serious effort to protect the environment.²⁴

Up to this time, the NGOs had primarily sought to help villagers maintain their settlement in this forest-fringe village. Guided by their philanthropic ideology, they used their development resources and expertise to support the village agriculture so that villagers would have the basic necessities – FEDRA emphasised its work on economic and social aspects, ATA on appropriate technology to enhance the village economy, while PER addressed the balance of economic and ecological dimensions. The three NGOs expected that the people would be able to help themselves when the NGOs moved out of the village altogether. However, they failed to consider changing situations and attitudes amidst rural transformation. The NGOs' activities in fact became forces which influenced a move towards commercial agriculture and further incursion into the forest areas.

In its 1983 report, DISAC had warned FEDRA to watch out for the “power structure of the community” (*khroongsang amnat kho:ng chumchon*). It was afraid that, without an understanding of village leaders, factions, local cultures and the socio-economic influence from outside, FEDRA's development activities could become a catalyst for promoting the market-oriented economy.²⁵ To a large extent, that is what happened in Village 1. The villagers accepted the modern administration and did not reject the market economy if it helped them to maintain their well-being and increase their economic interest. However, they would not have become involved, to the same extent, in the market economy and agricultural commercialisation in the first place if they had not had enough money to invest in the new crops; if they were unsure about the risk involved; or if the decision to adopt commercialisation was contrary to their traditional norms. When these inhibiting factors were no longer present due to FEDRA's funding support and other assistance, they did not hesitate to become involved in the market economy.

Facilitating environmental resource management

After working in Village 1 for a number of years, the NGOs had learnt the shortcomings in their development approaches. They had come to realise that working separately and focusing on their own organisational philosophies and sectoral programmes in isolation was not successful because aspects of development – social,

²⁴ Suporn Amarueckachoke, 1992, “Problems and Prospect of Alley-Cropping on Steep Land”, MSc thesis (Agriculture), Graduate School, Chiang Mai University, p. 57.

²⁵ Niphot, 1983 (2526), “Prasopkan thamngan phatthana...”, p. 25.

economic, cultural and political – were interwoven and needed to be addressed in context. They also began to recognise the need to become involved with the different actors who had an interest in village development. As an ATA worker argued in retrospect, “it is unrealistic that one NGO undertakes technological activities and waits for the other to raise people’s consciousness”.²⁶ A PER worker claimed at the time that most NGOs played only a minimal interventionist role as development educators because they believed too much in the “people’s capacity” to understand their own situations and development better than outsiders:

The common belief among NGOs in working with villagers is to let people obtain a self-learning process. That is to say, allowing villagers to think, understand and act by themselves. These NGOs are inclined to refuse any kind of guidance (*kan chi nam*) arguing that development workers should not think on behalf of the people.²⁷

He went on to refer to the environmental problem in the watershed area:

The situation of forest degradation in this area does not allow those NGOs not to take any action. If a villager continues or allows others to chop trees, the drought would certainly appear in this area as a consequence. Or if the people ceased to cut timber altogether, where would they obtain their income? This problem had to be solved by trying a new alternative.²⁸

The NGO workers from FEDRA, ATA and PER, therefore, agreed to work hand in hand to intervene in the competition over resources between villagers, local forestry officials and private entrepreneurs and to tackle environmental degradation in this watershed area.

The threat by officials in 1985 to relocate Village 1 had put the NGOs in a strong position to convince villagers to seriously consider environmental issues. PER, with the help of FEDRA and ATA workers, undertook a historical study of the forest depletion in both Village 1 and the Lua village. While they were collecting data for their report, they discussed with villagers how their labour had been expropriated by timber producers and some corrupt officials at the expense of the local environment and with no concern for the risks they took (e.g. being arrested by forestry police, injured or killed in the forest).²⁹ These discussions helped the villagers construct social knowledge of their situation.

The local forestry officials saw that the NGO activities might be helpful to them – especially as the official annual budget for forest management was small and manpower inadequate for patrolling a vast forest area. After discussions with ATA workers, the Forestry Superintendent responsible for the Mae Rim Conservation Forest accepted that

²⁶ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

²⁷ PER, 1987 (2530), “Chaoban kap nak phatthana” [Villagers and NGO Workers], [in Thai], Memo dated 24-25 September, Chiang Mai.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

the NGOs were introducing villagers to alternative agricultural techniques which were more friendly to the forest. Forestry officials agreed with the NGOs that environmental degradation would be reduced if alternative agriculture methods, including alley-cropping, mixed farming and biological pest control, proved to be successful. They supported the NGOs in encouraging villagers not to chop down trees and, more importantly, in helping to protect the forest from encroachment by private entrepreneurs who, it was alleged, were organising through their political links to have land in the conservation forest registered corruptly. In many areas throughout the Upper Northern Region, the invasion of the forest by these influential people went beyond the control of local, low-ranking forestry officials.³⁰

When ATA completed the hydropower plant in the Lua village in March 1987, the workers from three NGOs (PER, ATA and FEDRA) discussed with the leaders of the Lua village and Village 1 the possibility of initiating an environmental resource management plan in this watershed area. The NGO workers explained that the electricity was generated from the water resource which depended on an intact forest and asked villagers to observe the electrical power output in relation to the water level. They also discussed water use in general. A former village head of the Lua claimed that the rain no longer fell according to its season and that, when it did rain heavily in the mountains, it would run down to flood lowland villages as had not happened before.³¹ The people agreed there was, therefore, a need to protect the forest. It seems to me that NGO activities had encouraged villagers to recognise the impact of environmental degradation and the urgent need for forest protection. During my fieldwork, I also heard villagers complaining about the hydro-electricity power fluctuating, causing short circuit and damaging their electrical equipment. They knew that this happened because of the water supply level which would fall if there was extensive use of water for commercial agriculture, especially in the dry season.

The leaders of both villages and the NGO workers agreed to use some elements of traditional culture as a basis for formulating an environmental movement. As the migrants of Village 1 had neither a long history of settlement nor a leader who was able to guarantee the villagers' participation, it was decided to initiate the plan in the Lua village where some traditional leaders still remembered the village history and culture, especially in upland cultivation. Clearing forest land, for instance, was very important to the Lua and there were certain restraints. Before farming upland rice, a Lua leader had to perform a ritual to ask permission from the "lord of land" (*jaothi jaodin*). The Lua avoided cutting big trees by choosing an open area with few trees for fear that the

³⁰ Interview, INT-109-GOV, 25 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

³¹ PER, 1987 (2530), "Banthu'k kan prachum" [Record of the Meeting], [in Thai], dated 28 March, Chiang Mai.

“lord of the forest” (*jaopa*) living in the big trees would harm them. Based on the Lua’s culture of upland production, the NGOs constructed a social meaning of “community forest” referring to a form of “community culture” through which human beings were able to live in harmony with their environment. The NGO workers and villagers intended to use the “community forest” approach to obtain the participation of concerned actors to cooperate in managing the natural resources in this watershed area. They planned an opening ceremony for the hydropower plant – and to use it as an opportunity to win the participation of concerned actors to help map out an environmental management plan.

Over a month before the ceremony was held, the Lua villagers and NGO workers prepared a proposal for land and forest management in order to negotiate with local officials about future settlement in the forest. PER invited a village leader from Thung Yao village, Lamphun province, to discuss the experience of forest protection in his village and how this had helped reduce the negative impact resulting from economic development.³² The proposal recommended determination (by discussion) of forest boundaries between villages and forest classification. Similar activities were also conducted in Village 1 where it was agreed in principle that the land and forest resources could be divided into two categories. One was the conservation forest (*pa anurak*) which was composed of watershed and evergreen forest. The villagers would set up rules forbidding anybody to chop trees in the conservation forest. The other category was the utility forest (*pa chaiso:i*) where the forest was relatively degraded. It was agreed to allow only certain kinds of trees to be cut in the utility forest and then only for use within the village community.³³ These agreements were incorporated into a resource management plan to be put to a meeting at the opening ceremony for the Lua hydropower plant.

After the religious ceremony held on the morning of 28 March 1987 to open the hydropower plant in the Lua village, a meeting was held at which a Lua leader presented the land and forest management proposal. Those attending the meeting included the district head, a former forest superintendent, sub-district head, five village headmen and villagers. The meeting began with an outline by the former Lua village head of the forest degradation and its consequences such as soil erosion and especially the water shortage which affected the villages. Then, the proposed land and forest management plan was presented along with a set of rules for forest protection which had been previously agreed by the villagers themselves. Having the officials and

³² PER, 1987 (2530), “Bunthu’k kan lamdap hetkan kan koet kan anurak pa” [Record of the chronological events concerning forest-resource conservation] April 1986 (2529)-April 1987 (2530), [in Thai], Chiang Mai.

³³ PER *et al.*, 1987 (2530), “Rai-ngan kan samruat sapphayako:n pamai” [Report of the Forest-Resource Survey], [in Thai], May, Chiang Mai.

interested parties present meant that the plan could be discussed and agreed by all parties and could then be implemented. For example, the district head at that time asked for changes to a rule in the plan which said that a village headman would be punished by law if a resident of his village encroached on the forest. He pointed out that legal action could not be pursued against a village head if he himself did not break the law. Thus, the discussion between villagers and local officials helped ensure that the forest protection plan was accepted, in principle, by all parties at the meeting. Subsequently, detailed plans were prepared for each village by the people themselves. PER helped the Lua and residents of Village 1 to conduct their forest survey in 1987 in accordance with the classifications which had been agreed, and to specify village boundaries.

However, competition over land and forest resources in Village 1 continued to intensify in the late 1980s when government policies promoted economic growth through tourism and agri-business. Local brokers and private entrepreneurs from both Bangkok and Chiang Mai sought to buy land in this village to create agri-business ventures and to build holiday houses. *Pho:luang* Win and some local middlemen were active in convincing villagers to sell their lands in order to get commissions from private entrepreneurs for themselves. Local forestry officials saw the potential for rapid forest encroachment if the villagers continued selling land to outsiders who would chop down the forest trees for sale, plant commercial fruit orchards or build tourist resorts. They, therefore, tried to implement a government land title directive of 1985 which allowed only 15 rai of lowlands to be legally registered to a single household head. In this way they hoped to prevent the sale of unregistered land. However, the attempt failed because most villagers refused to register their land and actively protested against the implementation of the directive. One of the protesters told me that villagers were afraid that if they agreed to register their lowlands, they would lose their rights over their highland plots which could not be registered under the 1985 directive.³⁴ Later, some villagers were resentful that they had missed an opportunity to get their land registered. They felt that they had been misled by *Pho:luang* Win who had big plots of highland but little lowland and would not have benefited to the same degree from the registration provisions. Consequently, the villagers proposed to the district head that elections be held to choose a new village head to replace *Pho:luang* Win. As a result, *Pho:luang* Pa became the Village Head in 1989.

The change of leadership did not convince everyone that their future in the Village was secure. They were uncertain whether the local forestry officials would allow them to stay where they were or whether they would decide to relocate the village out of the forest altogether. Some villagers decided to jointly sell their rights over both lowland

³⁴

Interview, INT-090-VIL, 17 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

and highland plots to a Bangkok doctor and his friend, a manager of Thai Airways, in January and February 1988.³⁵ The land was sold at about 400 baht per rai and included about a half of the village cultivated land in the degraded forest (about 150 rai). While the doctor's friend used 50 rai of land to grow sweet tamarind, coconut and mango for domestic markets, the doctor left his land idle. Land sales in this village to outsiders occurred from time to time due to a lack of certainty of land ownership and utilisation. The sale in 1988 was a major event in the village history and represented significant evidence of competition over forest land between entrepreneurs, villagers and officials. Perhaps surprisingly, this situation led to cooperation between NGO and officials.

Although the forest and land management plan was agreed in 1987, its implementation activities were slow because, after PER workers opted out of this area in 1988, it took time for the villagers, ATA and FEDRA to establish suitable work arrangements with all parties concerned. In 1991, Bun (an ATA worker) with the help of Chai (a FEDRA worker) took up the forest management activities in addition to their other tasks.³⁶ As Mae Lo stream was the main stream used by five villages in the watershed area, Bun helped organise the respective leaders to draw a sketch map indicating their forest boundaries because local forest officials did not have a detailed map of the area. Then, the representatives discussed their village boundaries. Moreover, Bun and a group of about 10 villagers patrolled the forest areas around Mae Lo stream every fortnight to make sure there were no breaches of agreed rules. In addition, Bun and Chai encouraged the continuing cooperation between villagers and local forestry officials. Later, they also sought the support of other NGOs from Chiang Mai and Bangkok in the forest management activities to counter external pressure on the forest. Those agencies included the Multi-Cropping Centre (MCC – Faculty of Agriculture, Chiang Mai University), Sammu'n Highland Development Project (RFD), and NGO-CORD. In 1993, Bun told me that he did not know how long he would be able to continue conducting these activities with villagers because financial support was now difficult to obtain as funding agencies had shifted their support to environment activities at the national rather than community level.³⁷ The villagers themselves were very concerned about their future in the area and tried to seek assistance from other NGOs while cooperating with forestry officials to expand the government teak plantation.

In summary, the NGOs have encouraged villagers to develop a cooperative plan for land, forest and water management. It commenced with the Lua, who still recognised

³⁵ Interview, INT-093-VIL, 18 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

³⁶ An ATA worker who helped villagers operate the hydropower plant, rice mill and electric oven. A FEDRA worker followed up the revolving fund, rice bank and buffalo bank projects and helped transport village products such as dried bamboo shoot, soya bean seed and so on to district and city markets.

³⁷ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

their culture of the forest settlement, and it extended to other villages around the Mae Lo stream. The motivation for villagers to be involved in resource management was stimulated by PER, FEDRA and ATA, and was accepted by local officials. While the villagers wanted to maintain their settlement in the forest fringe, the officials wanted the villagers to help them protect the forest from being destroyed by illegal loggers and private entrepreneurs who had both economic and political influence.

Discussion

Transformation, competition, and intervention

Various forces of both structure and human agency influence the transformation of rural Thailand and can result in competition over the use of natural and productive resources. Between the early 1970s and early 1990s, the Thai political system had moved from a military-dominated regime to a parliamentary coalition. Despite the changes of government, however, the promotion of economic growth has been at the top of the agenda of national development policies since the early 1960s and was particularly strong under the Chatchai government (1988-1991). As indicated in Chapter 2, economic growth had led to uneven development as successive Thai governments had paid little attention to reforming the social and political structures and to ensuring an equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. Village 1 was populated by migrants who had come from various places in search of new land for their survival. Like many others in Thailand, these migrants had been pushed out of their own villages by the increasing competition for land in the spreading market-economy system. They complained about the high interest rates charged by money and rice lenders, a practice generally accepted in Thai society without questioning. In the region of Village 1, roads built to remote areas benefited the logging companies more than ordinary people. A Lua leader told me that the road built in 1975: "was built for 'capitalists' to be able to increase the transportation of timber out of the village" (*naithun khon mai o:k tik tik*).³⁸ The more the Lua saw this, the more they changed their attitudes towards customary belief and practice. They subsequently reduced their respect for the "lord of the forest" rather than miss out on using forest resources for cash income. Although local forestry officials in some areas were active in enforcing forest conservation laws on illegal loggers and investors of capital, their hands were generally tied because the RFD gave them little support. The influential entrepreneurs could get land in the conservation forest registered through their association with corrupt politicians and bureaucrats in Bangkok. The Forest Superintendent told me he felt like "the meat in the sandwich"

³⁸

Interview, INT-084-VIL, 14 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

when he was expected to perform his duty according to the public demand but could not do so properly because of the corrupt bureaucratic system.³⁹ Due to changing economic and social conditions, villagers wanted greater access to cash to supplement not only their basic food needs but also education, health services, general household goods and consumer items – all of which were part of the changing way of life. Villages could not go back to what they were. The need for cash income put pressure on villagers to have access to natural resource use while investors of capital had an eye on the same source of supply. This situation showed the increasing competition over the use of natural resources between various actors.

Competition over resources, environmental problems and social tensions were not new issues in Thai rural development. However, they had been obscured by the ideological conflicts between “the Right” and “the Left” until the mid-1980s.⁴⁰ After the decline of ideological conflict, NGO activists began to look beyond the ideological priorities and to reinterpret the concrete situation, as we have seen occurring in Village 1. However, the responses of different NGOs varied according to their particular outlooks.

Influenced by the concept of Marxist political economy, predominant among the Thai ‘left-wing intellectuals’ in the early 1980s, DISAC began to set up its rice bank activities while at the same time studying “the structure of power in the community”.⁴¹ In its report, DISAC clearly showed that it understood the situation of individual villagers, the social tensions between villagers and local officials and the tensions among villagers themselves. DISAC took a position against the domination of the state over the village by supporting a traditional leader to counterbalance the power of a formal village head who it considered represented the Thai political structure in the village. However, this, and its opposition to political centralisation, aroused not only mistrust between government officials and NGOs but also tensions among villagers – especially when DISAC distanced itself from communicating with quasi- and local officials.

As distinct from DISAC, FEDRA preferred to cooperate with local officials to deliver social services which were missing in the government approach. As FEDRA concentrated on social integration rather than social conflict, it neither conducted a village study nor paid much attention to analysing social tensions. It presumed that these were caused by the behaviour of individuals rather than the constraints of political and social structure. FEDRA generally created good relations with government officials. However, it had its own internal tensions which have occurred since the early

³⁹ Interview, INT-109-GOV, 25 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁴⁰ Hirsch, 1993, “Competition and Conflict over Resources...”.

⁴¹ Niphot, 1983 (2526), “Prasopkan thamngan phatthana...”, p. 25. See also the brief outline of DISAC in Chapter 3.

1980s between ‘progressive’ fieldworkers and FEDRA administrators concerning alternative development approaches. In particular, some FEDRA fieldworkers were interested in social analysis which was not supported by the organisation.

The other two NGOs, ATA and PER, had their own development agenda in Village 1. ATA’s prime interest lay in the application of “appropriate technology” such as the hydropower plant, rice mill and electric oven, as a means to help generate village income. It undertook a comprehensive feasibility study to commence its projects but then focused its work on the technical dimensions of the scheme and expected FEDRA to deal with social problems in the village. PER’s interest lay in the environmental issues and it tried to implement a “community forest” concept as a social meaning to stimulate the villagers’ awareness of environmental problems and the need to manage natural resources. In so doing, PER encouraged FEDRA and ATA to reassess their approach in the light of the people’s changing attitudes and behaviour. Together, the three NGOs were able to see the need to identify and include other development actors with an interest in the development of the village and environmental issues. They, therefore, agreed to reorientate the focus of their activities to intervene and mediate in the tensions between local officials and villagers over access to forest resources as well as to provide economic assistance. The following section deals with the interventionist role of the NGOs in relation to the rural transformation and competition over natural resources in two periods before and after the mid-1980s.

The considerable competition and tensions over natural and productive resources in Village 1 before the mid-1980s occurred on several fronts. Prior to the NGO involvement in this village, competition over access to resources was reflected in the high interest rates charged by money and rice lenders. The rice shortage of the 1960s and 1970s worried the village founder who was concerned that if the high interest rates continued, villagers would begin to sell off their land to pay accumulating debts. He, therefore, sought a way to intervene in the competition between rice lenders and new settlers by asking an NGO to set up a rice bank project.

At the same time, there was tension between forestry officials and the new settlers regarding forest resource use. The officials argued that the settlers were expanding their farming into the forest and, more importantly, were cutting timber illegally. The settlers argued that they did so only for their survival unlike the logging companies which received the government’s concession to cut down trees to make profit. They added that they had small tools, such as axes and hand saws, and did not damage the forest as much as logging companies which used large equipment such as electric saws, and trucks for transportation. They also pointed out the failure of forestry officials to discipline logging companies which did not follow the forestry rules. The villagers’ claim was not far from the truth, however, as the officials’ only response to the

destruction of the forest was to expand the official teak plantation to claim the area of the Mae Rim Conservation Forest and keep it safe from loggers.

Prior to the mid-1980s, the key tensions in Village 1 arose from the political mistrust between local interior officials, student activists and NGO workers. Fearing the expansion of communist insurgency, most authorities were suspicious of ‘outsiders’, especially students and NGO workers, who came to work in remote villages.⁴² In Village 1, these suspicions increased after Chiang Mai University students helped to build a school and the villagers demanded that the district head send a teacher. As the district office was slow to do this, the students took turns to teach the children. This made the authorities anxious that political unrest might arise.

When DISAC came to set up a rice bank project in response to the ongoing rice shortage, it was soon in the middle of conflicts. DISAC was regarded with suspicion because it was a Catholic NGO working in the Buddhist community and lacking communication with officials or even quasi-officials such as a village head. The latter factor made it difficult for DISAC to bridge the gap of mistrust especially as bypassing contact with officials was a common practice among social activists during the early 1980s.

The bottom-up people’s participation approach, introduced by NGOs at that time in the form of village development committees, confused most rural people who were accustomed to the officials’ top-down administration, alms-giving and philanthropic activities. The empowerment of the traditional leader did not work in Village 1 because the village founder used his position in the DISAC project against his rival rather than to serve the other members of the project. The rivalry between the traditional (the village founder) and modern leader (village head) stimulated tension among the migrants. This became particularly evident in the episode of the spirit speaking through a female villager and accusing DISAC. DISAC was quick to recognise the growing tensions between the village factions and deferred its activities to settle the disagreement.⁴³ Villagers later recognised that the DISAC rice bank was important to

⁴² This experience also occurred to me in the mid 1970s when I chose to work as a teacher in a village school in the Northeast Region. However, I was lucky to escape the authorities’ suspicion because of my helpful “patrons”. One was the district head who regarded me as a “younger sister” because we both graduated from Chulalongkorn University where the system of senior and junior was very strong in the 1970s. The other was my school headmaster who was my friend’s father and sympathised with my “unconventional” ideas. In addition, I discovered later on that my grandmother had donated money to build the village school where I worked to “gain merit” (*thambun*). Looking back over my past experience, I have found that staying free of political troubles has depended greatly on the importance of such associations and cultural outlooks.

⁴³ Fr Niphot was excited when he heard that a female villager broke her silence out of concern about the village dispute. What interests me are the ways in which villagers used different approaches to solve their problems.

the survival of their settlement. It had helped solve the problem of rice shortage and reduced the pressure of high interest rates imposed by rice lenders. Without DISAC's presence in the early 1980s, "we [villagers] would have lost our land to the 'capitalists' and the village would no longer exist".⁴⁴ Most villagers I interviewed including *Pho:luang* Win agreed that the economic intervention of DISAC was significant in the survival of the village and came just at the right time.

FEDRA moved into the same situation of tension which had faced DISAC. However, it was not viewed by officials with the same suspicion because FEDRA was a Buddhist NGO coming to work in the Buddhist community. The villagers felt more comfortable dealing with FEDRA because they were not being continually questioned by the authorities about the new NGO's activities and were no longer suspected of supporting 'political agitators'. Economically, FEDRA continued the rice bank activities of DISAC and expanded them to include several projects such as the revolving fund and buffalo bank. The villagers' proposal to construct an irrigation system to increase commercial agriculture with FEDRA financial support was a clear reflection of their expanding needs in the changing rural economy.

In contrast to FEDRA, which intended to minimise socio-economic change in rural areas, ATA recognised that socio-economic change was inevitable and tried to make this beneficial to villagers. In practice, however, ATA focused only on the improved soya bean and alley-cropping experiments, that is, on the technological aspect of change rather than the social and economic dimensions. It overlooked the fact that the change could also benefit businessmen who were in touch with the villagers in the everyday economy, for instance, middlemen buying cash crops from villagers and salesmen selling consumer goods to villagers. The new technical assistance was more efficient and initially meant more production without needing more land. However, this was very quickly reversed when the increased income-generating activities encouraged the village to spend more on commercial goods and eventually to expand their farming into the forest. This impact had not been anticipated by ATA and led to renewed tensions between the villagers and forest officials, but again the NGOs were able to respond creatively to the new situation in the form of a resource management plan.

The new Village Head, with the help of his wife, performed his duty properly and became an active leader engaged in alley-cropping with ATA and PER. The forestry officials strongly endorsed the forest and soil conservation activities. They also expected that the NGOs and people could help them prevent the forest from being encroached on by private entrepreneurs. After the mid-1980s, the problem of mistrust between officials, NGO workers and villagers gradually eased only to be replaced by

⁴⁴

Interview, INT-094-VIL, 19 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

tension between officials and business concerning access to the forest and other natural resources. This became apparent in the late 1980s when officials realised the limitations in their ability to protect the forest from being extensively encroached upon by business interests. They needed NGO workers to control villagers and to cooperate with them to pursue their duty.

Throughout the period of study and the different stages of change, the relationship between NGO fieldworkers and villagers was sound, and there is little doubt that the NGOs have been able to construct good relationships with the rural people. For instance, a villager told me about the commitment of Phithak, who encouraged the development committee members and other villagers who had little formal education to manage development projects:

He supervised us [villagers] to run all the projects and knew everything about us. He came to work in this village when he was a [Chiang Mai] university student and again when he joined FEDRA in 1984. He spent seven to eight days a month staying in a village hut so that he could discuss with us concerning several development issues which we did not understand and inquire our activities to make us think further. Even though he left FEDRA, he still came to visit us.⁴⁵

Having seen the link between local officials, politicians and villagers, FEDRA tried not to upset the balance of the relationship unnecessarily, however, the field workers were more inclined to question and to challenge FEDRA's approach.

Since the mid-1980s when the NGO ideological belief that "the people can do no wrong"⁴⁶ weakened, fieldworkers from both FEDRA and ATA began to realise that they lacked an analysis of people's attitudes and behaviour in relation to socio-economic change. A FEDRA worker reflected:

We know the people, for example, who is who in the village but we do not understand or even learn to analyse their thought and performances in relation to reality.⁴⁷

The reflection highlights the tension arising within the NGO community and a communication gap between the NGO fieldworkers and their headquarters. While NGO projects had already been designed by NGO headquarters, many villagers, whose needs were dependent upon the cash economy, chose to become involved with the project or organisation which was likely to benefit them most. Moreover, some villagers helped shape activities which, they believed, would enhance their income. The weir and hydro-electricity projects were cases in point where FEDRA and ATA conducted development activities responding to the people's needs along the lines of a market-oriented economy. A FEDRA fieldworker accepted that the NGO economic

⁴⁵ Interview, INT-093-VIL, 18 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁴⁶ Friedmann, 1992, *Empowerment...*, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Interview, INT-047-NGO, 19 December 1992, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

and technological activities turned out to be catalytic factors promoting agrarian change and causing environmental problems. He concluded that:

We cannot claim that the force influencing economic change comes only from official conduct. While solving economic problems along with villagers, the NGOs, too, played a significant role in the process of change. We supported agricultural intensification and commercialisation financially; organised trips for villagers to see various kinds of agricultural innovation; and adopted the techniques without the understanding of the concepts behind. We [both villagers and NGOs] had been struggling for the betterment in the state's framework and mechanism.⁴⁸

How did NGO fieldworkers deal with the situation when they found their development activities becoming forces influencing villagers to conduct agrarian change and forest encroachment? In this case, the fieldworkers from FEDRA, ATA and PER discussed and criticised their own activities which had produced the unexpected results. An ATA worker pointed out that the so-called 'division of labour' among NGOs, which was based on the different expertise of each organisation, neglected the holistic nature of development. For example, one NGO undertook technological activities to help villagers generate their income and waited for another NGO to deal with social problems and forest depletion. What the ATA worker pointed out is that it is important for development theorists and practitioners to understand local situations and networks of social relations among actors in a given context.

The NGO workers also criticised the non-interventionist approach of NGOs concerning the people's knowledge. PER workers pointed out the main problem of forest depletion in this area had existed and been aggravated since the village settlement in the early 1960s. They also noted the tensions between villagers, forestry officials and private entrepreneurs regarding competition over the use of land and forest resources. These problems, they argued, meant that the NGOs must intervene to alleviate the tensions and stop forest encroachment. The critical thinking of NGOs in this case helped them to see that the people's changing attitudes and behaviour were dependent to some extent upon the cash economy.

The NGOs also wanted to challenge the perception of some forestry officials who believed that people were unable to manage forest resources by themselves. According to an ATA worker, a forestry official once argued:

The management of forest resources was not something which villagers were able to do by themselves. It had to be done step by step [following official procedure]. The system which NGOs used was a "communist" system. I understand that we have the same objective of protecting forest but different approaches.⁴⁹

This attitude changed when they realised that they did not have enough resources to pursue the management of forest resources alone. Nor did they have any space to

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

relocate villagers. In this situation, the officials wanted the villagers to help them to protect the forest from being destroyed by illegal loggers and encroachment by private entrepreneurs who had both economic and political power whereas the villagers wanted to maintain their settlement in the forest fringe. As far as the NGOs were concerned, they were, as Melucci argues and I quoted at the beginning of the Chapter, “forced to imagine the social and political means of controlling this difference”.⁵⁰

The NGOs demonstrated to local officials that people could live with and manage the forest. In this case, I found some important factors which contributed to the NGO playing an interventionist role. First, the NGOs saw everyday politics as inseparable from organising the people’s environmental movement. In formulating the people’s collective action, the NGOs developed the social meaning of “community forest” from the methods used by the Lua and the Northern Thai people of Thung Yao village in Lamphun province to protect their forest from being encroached upon by investors of capital. They aimed to draw the participation of the villagers living in the watershed area to negotiate a settlement with forestry officials. The NGOs presented the “community forest” approach practically by helping villagers map out village boundaries and set up rules to use the forest and to punish those who broke them.

Secondly, the NGOs and villagers agreed that it was necessary to draw other concerned actors and organisations to participate in the resource management plan. In this way, the NGOs encouraged social actors to recognise not only their social relations but also the current problem of local environmental degradation in the area.

Thirdly, the NGOs and villagers recognised the significance of time and space in bringing together social and environmental movements. They organised a religious ceremony to open the small hydropower plant in the Lua village, which the RFD recognise as an excised area, to show that the Lua had been maintaining some traditional practices and living in the forest long before the Forest Conservation Act of 1964. At a meeting which took place after the opening ceremony their resource management plan was overwhelmingly accepted. However, the plan was just a blueprint. The villagers and NGO fieldworkers had to work out its details and continue their forest management activities. This has been done with some difficulty since the early 1990s due to lack of funding support for the NGOs.

⁵⁰ Melucci, 1988, “Social Movements and the Democratisation...”, p. 252.

Some issues from fieldwork

First, it is unlikely that the NGO implementation of alternative development strategies to help people empower themselves can bypass the state. During the 1980s, the fieldworkers of four NGOs (DISAC, FEDRA, ATA and PER) had difficulties implementing alternative development strategies with the people of Village 1 – most of whom were migrants from different parts of rural Thailand and possessing different cultures. A PER worker called this village *Ban kaengho* because she felt frustrated by the villagers' endless disagreements.⁵¹ The NGO workers received more support from the villagers when the relationship between the NGOs and officials was recognised and assumed the middle ground of cooperation, not ideological conflict. The villagers seemed to accept the authority of village head, a quasi-official in the modern administration. For example, the school teacher criticised the DISAC workers' approach to community work saying that they often went to, or organised meetings at, the house of the village founder without recognising the village head. He suggested that the DISAC workers should also have visited *Pho:luang* Win because: "*Yang rai khao ko: pen kae ban*" (He was, after all, the village head).⁵² When *Pho:luang* Pa, the current Village Head, replaced *Pho:luang* Win in 1989, the villagers seemed to accept the change of leadership and responsibility of the new incumbent, Pa, to take care of this multi-cultural village.

Although the NGOs were successful in helping the Lua and Village 1 residents to formulate a resource management plan in the Mae Lo watershed area, their success could not have been accomplished without the cooperation of local officials and quasi-officials. Local officials, especially forestry officers, sought the cooperation of village leaders and NGO workers as forest keepers to prevent the private entrepreneurs from encroaching into the Mae Rim conservation forest and changing its landscape for commercial purposes. This practical approach to protecting the forest by the forestry officials in Mae Rim district showed an understanding of power relations between different actors.

Secondly, there are more likely to be political rather than technical reasons why two villagers in Village 1 adopted the alternative farming practices promoted by the NGOs. Their reason was essentially to convince the forestry officials that their settlement in the forest did not harm the local environment. They sought to show the officials that they could help to guard the forest. However, the NGO claim that alternative, sometimes called indigenous, farming practices could replace scientific or modern farming

⁵¹ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. "*Ban kaengho*" or "*Kaengho* Village" is analogised by a PER worker referring to a Northern Thai dish which has a mixture of many kinds of vegetables and meats. It is because villagers are migrants from different places and composed of different cultures.

⁵² Niphot, 1983 (2526), "Prasopkan thamngan phatthana...", p. 21.

methods and help sustain the village livelihood, is debatable. That is because when the NGOs encouraged the villagers to adopt the indigenous farming technique, many villagers, especially the marginal, waited to see if it worked in their environment because they could not afford to take a risk if it failed. In early 1993, the villagers (including those two who had adopted the alley-cropping technique introduced by an ATA worker) were engaged in intensive farming practices while experimenting with organic farming methods. The choice is not simply between two methods of agriculture. The common sense of survival makes the villagers more pragmatic than idealistic in managing the problems of the local environment and their own needs over time.

Thirdly, while the NGO fieldworkers saw a people's environmental movement emerging from the elaboration of social meaning in their daily life as the consequence of relations among humans and between humans and nature, many other NGOs still perceived the people's movement largely in forms of collective protests. Although collective protest is a useful form of political intervention, it is often an outcome of the movement rather than its starting point. As we saw, the resource management plan in the Mae Lo watershed area started from the interpretation of the "community forest" concept in relation to the culture of the Lua. An ATA fieldworker, who helped the village leaders carry on day-to-day forest management activities, argued that it was necessary to have a community organiser to work with the villagers for a time until the people were able to manage by themselves. He also pointed out that many funding agencies preferred to give financial support to NGOs which were conducting environmental campaign activities or policy advocacy at the national and international levels rather than to those which were organising people's environmental movements at the grass-roots level.⁵³ Without manpower and financial support, the ATA worker was afraid that the embryo of the people's collective activities in protecting the forest might be lost. For some time, we have perceived a 'social movement' only in the form of collective protest. Nevertheless, the formation of the people's environmental movement in the Mae Lo watershed area shows the starting point of social movement as "a general representation of social life".⁵⁴ The everyday actions of the people should not be analysed in isolation from the collective activities because they are "two poles" of the social movement.⁵⁵

⁵³ Interview, INT-086-NGO, 16 January 1993, Mae Rim, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁴ Touraine, 1995, "Beyond Social Movements?", p. 372.

⁵⁵ Melucci, 1988, "Social Movements and the Democratisation...", p. 248.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has shown how four indigenous, people-centred Thai NGOs have intervened in competition over resources which affected villagers during the transformation of rural Thailand in the 1980s. Prior to the mid-1980s, competition arose from the declaration of the conservation forest, logging concessions and high interest rates and affected relations between government officials, logging companies, money lenders and rural people. At that time, the issues of competition over resources were dominated by the ideological conflict – from the nation down to the village – between the officials, rural people, university students and NGOs. The people-centred NGOs, which emerged outside the bureaucratic and business domination from the mid-1970s, adopted a people's participation concept against the denial of the people's rights to development from the Thai political structure. Guided by alternative development strategies, the NGOs also adopted a position against the 'state' and 'capitalism' while working with the 'people' in remote areas.

After the mid-1980s, the ideological conflict began to decline and competition over resources became widely spread throughout the countryside. Through trial and error, the NGOs moved from their strong ideological orientation of the 1970s to a more realistic understanding of empirical situations in which various actors were competing to control resources.

In the transformation occurring in Village 1, the NGOs played an interventionist role, helping to turn competition over resources into cooperation in the form of a resource management plan. The plan became a blueprint for the rural people of different tribes and local officials to prevent the forest in the watershed area from being encroached on further. The NGO interventions in this area have contributed to the understanding and learning process of other NGOs working in similar environments by: emphasising the need to understand local situations and cultures in relation to current changes in the political economy of rural Thailand; constructing the social meaning of "community forest" in relation to the Lua's remaining culture, to gain the participation of all concerned social actors; recognising the relation between social actors and system and trying to make the power visible, negotiable and, therefore, controllable.⁵⁶ However, the social meaning is not permanently fixed. Nor is the achievement of NGO intervention. The intervention is an on-going activity, for new situations occur, new tensions arise and new meanings begin to shift over time.

⁵⁶

Ibid., p. 250.



Plate 1. Village 1 and its surroundings in early 1993.

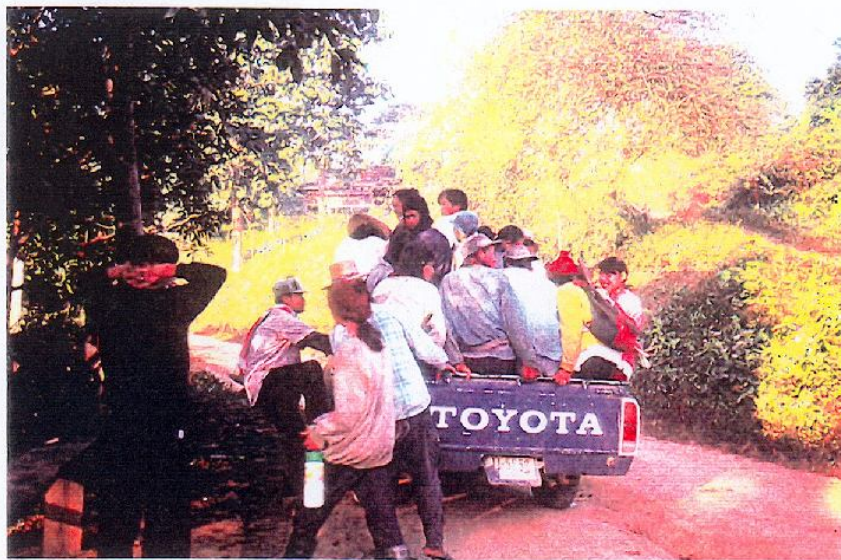


Plate 2 Villagers going to work in the state teak plantation.

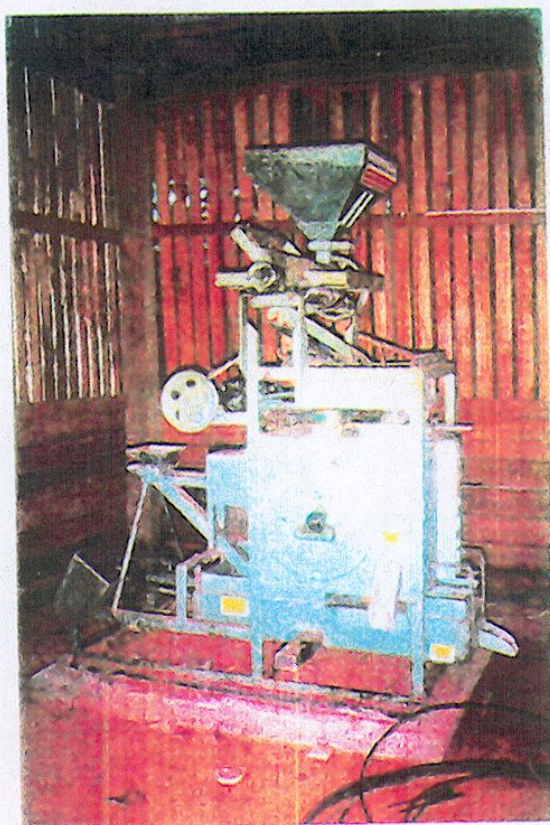


Plate 3 Rice mill set up with assistance of ATA engineers.

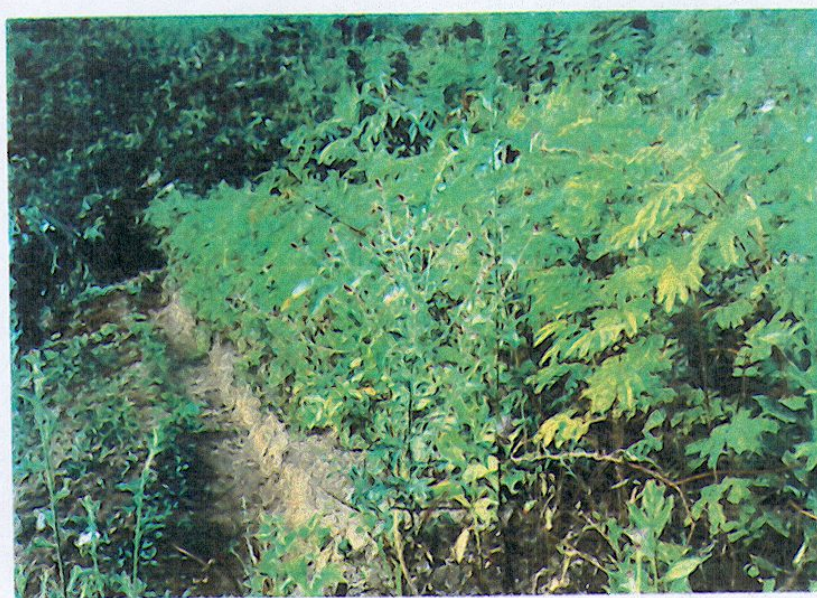


Plate 4 Alley cropping technique introduced by an ATA worker (agricultural expert).



Plate 5. Villagers drawing a map to identify forest and village boundaries.

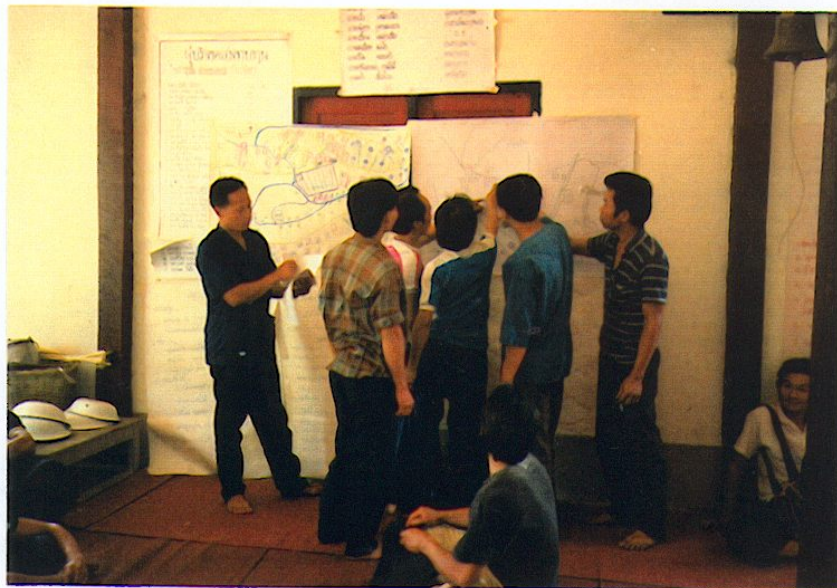


Plate 6 Villagers discussing and correcting the village and forest boundaries.



Plate 7. Villagers patrolling the forest.



Plate 8 Villagers having a rest at the ATA worker's residence.