

NGO Activity and Rural Development in Thailand

- Buddhist Rural Development NGO Through to the Early 1990s -

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Introduction

There are increasing the number of NGOs in the world. The aims of Thai NGO activity are largely classed as follows; promotion of human rights of women or children, health care and medical relief, promotion of slum life, relief of refugees, rural development, NGOs coordinating, and advocacy activity. While Japanese ODA has been criticized, NGOs have been estimated in these activities in the worldwide.

In general, the ideals of NGOs may be said the pursuit of humanistic right, the coalition of people, the orientation of universal value, and tackling rural poverty. NGOs have worked to solve these problems. First, NGOs have been well estimated in that NGO workers promote a project discussing with villagers how to develop. In short, when they make a development plan, they have peasants participate in making a plan, and promote a project. NGO workers have peasants motivate to develop their village. One of NGOs' roles is to have villagers participate in the process of a planning and implementing of development. Second, it can promote a project, rapidly, flexibly, and economically. Third, it can provide an adequate technique for natural environment. Fourth, it can develop respecting the cultural orders of villages.

The number of rural development NGO has been increasing in Thailand. Nowadays, rural development NGO has numbered much more than 200 in 1992. Rural development might be said one of the most important activities of NGOs. NGOs have the above-mentioned merits. On the other hand, you must notice that NGOs' activities have the demerits as the followings. Rural development NGO workers often look down upon peasants, and compile their projects to villagers without consulting with them. But you should recognize that villagers could solve their problems by themselves. NGO workers had villagers participating to develop their community (Oakley and Marsden 1984) . Thai NGOs has the characteristic of conducting rural development by promoting a spirit of "self-reliance" and integrated agriculture (Heim *et al.* 1984 ; Seri 1992) .

This paper aims to reconsider spirit of "self-reliance" that Thai NGO advocates. For this purpose I will check out the activity process of rural development NGO. Sulak Svaraksa thought that the ideal of "self-reliance" is good, but the problem is the process of the activities. For this purpose I take up the idea of Buddhist rural development NGOs and the idea of Sulak, who is one of the most famous Thai NGOs leaders, as a sample.

2 A Brief History of Thai NGOs

The Thai government conducted many rural projects such as "Master Plan for Solution to Poverty Problem" consisting of four projects; Rural Employment Creation Project, the Village Activities Promotion Project, the Basic Service Provision Project and the Production Project (TDSC 1987: 9). But these projects did not improve the conditions of peasants' lives. They instead come to be in debt in fact. NGOs might be said to provide alternative rural development idea.

Since Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat started the First Economic and Social Development Plan from 1961. After then the national plan has been succeeded, and now the seventh national plan is carrying out. Prime Minister Sarit is famous politician as conducting a paternalistic policy, for instance he implemented the national development plan as a kind of paternal grant. National Economic Development Board (NEDB) was founded in 1959, and later National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB).

Furthermore, Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) was established in 1984 to conduct the policy research and disseminate results to the public and private sectors. NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD) was established in 1985. This committee, which served NGOs, worked to coordinate among NGOs as well as between NGOs and the government. The present King, Bhumipol Adulyadej, also promoted development programs through the royal development plan since the 1960s. The King and his royal family have often endeavored to develop poor villages in rural areas.

The King and government have arranged the infrastructure, which was mainly equipped through the modernization, namely the national economic and social development plan and the royal development plan: e.g. constructing roads, the bridges built, dams, irrigation and others equipped. There have been prevailing cultivating machines, mobilization, cash crops in the whole country, and the wage labor became to take the place of the exchange of labor. Then the strata of peasants have polarized, which means rich peasants are richer, while poor peasants are poorer.

Besides, the difference of incomes is increasing between residents in rural areas and

ones in urban. Nowadays, the wage of rural peasants is one of twelve compared with that of urban labors. Then, peasants are going to work in Bangkok etc. The big capital prevails in rural area, for example rural peasants have to buy seeds, fertilizer, agricultural chemical, selling products to big companies, which export them. In short, the Thai farming structure partly changed from self-sufficiency to cash crop farming, while most peasants still remain self-sufficient.

Thai NGOs started to overcome the problems brought out by the modernization. Rural development NGOs work to struggle with the most basic problems in rural areas above all. I will take a bird's-eye view on a brief history of Thai NGOs. First rural development NGO was Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM), called the munnithi buruna chonabot in Thai, which founded by Dr. Puey Ungphakorn in 1967. Another important NGO was Catholic Council of Thailand for Development (CCTD) that formally set up in 1973. The CCTD is one of pioneer NGOs to make much of cultural approach for development. After 1976, NGOs was forced underground. The coordinating body, The Thai Development Support Committee (TDSC) was established in 1982, helping a large number of NGOs to communicate each other. A major seminar on "Rural Development in Thailand" was held in 1984. This meeting was remarkable in a critical assessment of the government development.

As you know, Thai rural development NGOs were unhappy in the 1970s, such as the government often has suspicion that NGO workers are communists. NGOs, then, come to work with helping with the government each other. The government has regarded NGOs as one part of Government Organizations(GOs). It was derived from that both GOs and NGOs promote the likely projects; forming of saving groups, rice bank, buffalo bank, training occupation, and others through the idea of self-reliance, Village Institution Promotion (VIP) and Rural Development Documentation Centre (RUDOC) combined to be coalitional NGO, called Thai Institute for Rural Development (THIRD), in 1988. The THIRD was said one of the most valuable NGOs. The leader of this organization is Seri Phongphit who edited to publish some popular books; *Back to the Root*, *Religion in the Changing Society*, and *Turning Point of Thai Peasants*. His idea and these books are widely influencing NGO workers. He may be said to be one of idealistic leaders of Thai NGOs.

Nowadays, the characteristics of NGOs are as the followings. NGO workers were apt to value rural development rather than the others. Most of NGO workers tried to develop by making much of the Buddhist idea. The monks participate with rural development above all. They thus cooperate with GOs in development processes. They respect natural environment

due to the world wide NGOs. Finally, they are interested in the natural problems: i.e. the conservation of natural environment in the place of social problems.

3 Types of the Projects of Rural Development NGOs

I will class types of rural development NGOs. First, according to Dr. Puey, they are summarized as follows (Phanomwan and Walter 1988: 36) :

- (1) Rural community organization and community development work.
- (2) Support for the role of community leaders (teachers or monks) in community development work.
- (3) Community leaders and youth training for development.
- (4) Children's development projects (nutrition, day-care centers, child labor, mass media for children, progressive education, etc.)
- (5) Primary health care work.
- (6) Campaign work on human rights issues and social problems.
- (7) Appropriate technology projects and service.
- (8) Projects and campaigns on women's issues.
- (9) Training of development workers, provision of volunteers.
- (10) Coordination of activities among development organizations.

Moreover, I will reclassify the types of aims in the case of Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Management (FARM) which was established in 1980. For example, the community development projects of the FARM are divided into buffalo bank, village medicines bank, rice bank, fertilizer bank, water resource improvement, integrated agricultural promotion, school lunch program, *Samlow* (tricycle) cooperation, and women vocational training program to prevent a lot of prostitutes, urban project such as supporting poor people in slum, and hill tribe projects. The types of the FARM projects can be classed in six types. One type is to form a group such as a rice bank, a buffalo bank, a savings group etc. Second is concerning to the circumstance-friendly agriculture like integrated or organic agriculture. Third is the project for women concerning to a vocational women training to learn some techniques or prevent women from becoming prostitutes. Fourth is for students, e.g. a school lunch program, a scholarship, and constructing a little library or pre-school day care center etc. Fifth is to improve community-based goods like water resource. Sixth is to prevail the idea of Buddhism for monks interested in development work. Besides, there is a type of project that cannot be found in the projects of the FARM. That project is to promote the Buddha's teachings, namely Dhamma, to solve some cultural problems.

4 Issues of the Rural Development NGOs' Activities

Dr. Puey summarized the issues of NGOs are as follows (Phanomwan and Walter 1988: 36-38).

- (1) Lack of stability, recognition, and public support.
- (2) Lack of competent and experienced manpower.
- (3) Inadequate self-development and learning through experience.
- (4) Lack of common direction.
- (5) Problems concerning political climate.

NGO coordinating committee indicates that the issues are as follows (TDSC : 26-27). First, it is the lack of exchange of information and techniques of experienced workers to coordinate. Second, it is the lack of technical and financial supports concerning the organization and management of villagers' movements. These are concerning (2) and (3) which Dr. Puey addressed. Third, NGO workers criticize that a rice bank introduces the economic system of *laissez-faire* into the villages. Finally, it is related to the idea of Buddhist rural development.

As far as the issues of development process are concerned, I shall pick up a rice bank. Apichart thought that a rice bank developed a number of capitalists among the peasants, introducing a new business system in the villages, and the richer the peasants became, the poorer the peasants became (Apichart 1986: 61). Is the critique of Apichart true? But I do not think so.

First, I cannot have the view that the peasants should produce for their consumption. I believe that his idea is true in one side, because the peasants will not be able to subsist if they do not produce cash crops for free market. In short, the peasants need to produce crops not only for self-consumption but also for market. Concerning the integrated farming in which some NGOs encourage, it is significant to criticize the attitude of self-consumption. However, as you have seen, you should not consider that NGO workers have contributed to introduce the economic system of *laissez-faire* into the villages through a rice bank or a saving group. It is a way for villagers to assemble capital at a short time, pretending themselves from rich men, as they cannot help renting from rich men in high interest. But there are some problems in that poor villagers are almost not member in rice banks or saving groups. Namely, poor villagers are excluded from them. Furthermore, the farmers of middle class are mainly leaders among the villagers. The problem is, accordingly, a method of making a group. However, it is difficult to practice the integrated farming, because the peasants

will not be able to subsist enough without partly dependent on free market.

Second, in the case of Apichart, it is the problem that the village can be regarded to be autonomous. As Keyes said, a village is a natural community in northeastern Thailand. On the contrary, a village is not somehow a natural community in northern Thailand. Then, as Potter said, the Thai village structure is not the same throughout Thailand. A village structure is different between the northeastern and the northern region.

Third, rural development NGO such as the CCTD, at present, start to take a cultural approach. From the perspective of cultural approach, the concept of self-reliance cannot be interpreted as the independent. The concept implies the collective rather than the individualistic (CCTD : 70), for the Thai people pay respect to helping each other (*chuai kan*), being interdependent. I think their habitus is equal to content of the term "*laeo tae*", which the people really used. The each community has different culture in a historical and social process. NGO workers, in this sense, put emphasis on "local wisdom": villager's way of life, way of thinking, and belief system (TDSC : 18-9). The villagers are really ego-centric, factional, and cooperative. NGO workers have to understand a community culture before doing activities in advance. But it is important to notice that the villagers put respect to their culture. If the labors derived from rural area know their culture, they could come back to help for their home. Moreover, the villagers could work to help among others for themselves. It is important for NGO workers to develop the cultural identity of villagers.

Fourth, a large number of NGOs adopted the Buddhist idea as an ideal purpose. This idea includes the case that monks are leaders. Buddhism is regarded to be a basis of the Thai traditional culture. This fourth type has different character from the third type. It is important to divide these two types. The Buddhist development NGOs have respect for spiritualism rather than materialism or consumerism. This type is called an alternative development in the sense.

5 Issues of Buddhist Rural Development NGOs' Activities

Buddhist rural development NGOs value Thai traditional culture. To grasp this aspect I will take up the case of Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA), one of the most famous NGOs in the northern region. The FEDRA was set up in 1974, and was registered in 1975. The office is at the temple called Pa Dara Bhirom in Chiangmai Province, which Gohlert referred to (Gohlert 1991: 176-8). The FEDRA's main purposes are to encourage agriculture, to encourage education, to promote religion, and to develop local areas. First and second principles are solutions for material problems. But the

third is a solution for spiritual problem. The FEDRA hold diligence, frugality, self-sacrifice, and unity in Buddha's teachings in great account.

Four principles of diligence, frugality, self-sacrifice, and unity are held in esteem. The unique activity of the FEDRA is that the monks participate in developing the village: the project is Sangha Promotion Program for Rural Development. Vanpen analyzed the history and activities of FEDRA in his book in detail. Vanpen estimated the projects of GO as well as those of NGOs, e.g. the FEDRA.

For example, villagers participate in the cases of GOs more than NGOs (Vanpen 1988: 120). The other hand, the FEDRA not only carries out the integrated agriculture, but also supports the villagers to product a cash crop. It arranges to supply the villagers some types of production at the same time: i.e. for self-consumption and nearby and remote markets.

As is well known, Sluk is one of the most famous NGOs' leaders. He criticized government development as a materialism, quantitative and consumerism in the some aspects. Then he gives weight to Buddhism as the Thai traditional culture. He esteems spirit rather than material, quality rather than quantity, diligence rather than greed for consumption.

By the way, it is well known that he gives importance to the Four Sublime Abodes (Brahma Vihara) : loving kindness (*Metta*), compassion (*Karuna*), sympathetic joy (*Mudita*), and Equanimity (*Upekkha*) (Sulak 1981:75-78). He has been influenced from the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement that started as the development movement in Srilanka. So then he respects the four Dhamma, namely sharing (*dana*), pleasant speech (*piyavaca*), constructive action (*atthacariya*), and equality (*samanattata*). The movement might be said Buddhist socialism which goals are love, freedom, liberation, and equality (Sulak 1981).

I think that Buddhism is nothing but making merits for peasants. However, the Thai people are classed in ruling class and subordinate class. The rulers used Brahmanism and Buddhism for legitimacy of governance. The peasants believe the spirit (*phii*) belief from old times. The Thai religion is syncretic in which indigenous *phii* belief, Brahmanism, and Buddhism mix.

Anyway, one must notice that Buddhism has been used as the instrument of modernization by the Thai royal family and government to dominate the people. In other words, the Thai government has driven the modernization by means of the promotion of the spirit of Buddhism through promoting the modernization.

However, the peasants believe Buddhism only on the surface. In other words, they believe Buddhism to gain merits in the present world through merit-making. The people believe only merit-making and Karma in Buddhism. According to Chuji Tanaka, villagers pray

peace of life (*kwaam yuu dii kin dii*), and have the worldview of *saiyasat* from early times. The term *saiyasat* means the people believe the spirits in all natural things; grass, tree, river, rice and so on (Tanaka 1989: 88-101), and made of syncretism of indigenous animistic belief, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. For instance, Niels Mulder did not use the term *saiyasat*, but use the term *saksit*, while he uses the term *dech* as undomesticated power (Mulder 1979: 15-33). The people accepted Buddhism on the basis of *saiyasat*.

By the way, NGO workers tend to have an idea that Buddhism is the traditional cultural order. For example, the Thai intellectual such as . Sulak got this idea. Have they forgotten the fact that Buddhism was controlled under the development plan of the government? Otherwise, have they forgotten the fact that the people believe only Buddhism in merit-making? The villagers do not understand the principles of Buddha's teachings, and do not have a disposition of the diligence, frugality, self-sacrifice, and unity through believing Buddhism. The people only hope to be happy by making merits rather than becoming unselfish, diligence, frugality or self-sacrifice, etc. According to Tanaka, the people believe the *saiyasat*, although Sulak did not refer to the above idea. I think that he should understand the above idea. Then I think the cultural aspect such as the *saiyasat* in the context of social aspect such as historical and social aspect. One should not understand these aspects separately.

5 Social Structure of Thai Rural Society

It is notable that Dr. Akin, Tanaka, and others have studied patron-client relations. According to Dr. Akin, the patron-client relations are nuclear characteristic in human relationship of the Thai people. You can see superior-subordinate relations anywhere, as this is the patron-client relationship. In general, patronage makes peasants have dispositions dependent on patron. The patron-client relations have a base of *sakdina* institution and *phrai* institution in the pre-modern regime. According to Tanaka's study, the personality of the Thai people is present-oriented, lack of time perspective, love fun (*sanuk*), *saiyasat*. As the peasants are ego-centric and love fun, they prevent them cooperating in the long term. Poor peasants tend to agree with rich men formally in the village meeting in spite of their factual disagreement. Their formal actions prevent rich men from getting angry. As poor peasants are rent from rich peasants, they fear rich peasants; the relationship between rich peasants and poor peasants are the patron-client one.

However, some leaders of NGOs have considered that the Thai villages are themselves an autonomous society with political system, original culture, social or educational system in

every village (Apichart 1986: 47). But I do not think that every village has a unity, because some researchers understand that the Thai village does not have a unity and cooperation in the village in northern Thai village. But multi-households of kinsmen actually have cooperation everywhere and every time, and some conflicts have broken out in almost villages. There is factionalism prevalent in the villages, as some researchers noted. The factionalism means the patron-client relations. Then there is common wealth in the northeastern Thai village, unlike the northern Thai village. Accordingly, I will not be able to assume that every village has common wealth, a unity and cooperation.

I understand that the Thai village is recently imaged to have an autonomous system. If I explain it concretely, it is well to be said that the government has made the village have a unity through the administrative institution. That is to say, the Thai government made a village headman and a village committee have a prestige in villages, because they progress rural development in rural area and ordered them to dominate villagers through the administrative institution.

6 Conclusion

As Sulak said, the method of government development is materialistic, consumerism, and quantitative rather than qualitative, and then indigenous NGOs work to set store on community participation, a self-reliance, etc. I think that indigenous NGOs themselves are alternative development. As Gohlert said, the ends do not justify the means. The community participation in the process of decision-making is valuable in itself (Gohlert 1991: 189). The ideas of self-reliance or cultural integrity can be realized through the process of rural development. One can say that the means will be more important than the ends; in short, that poor peasants protect themselves from rich men through making a group.

The cultural approach is prevalent in many NGOs. There are no absolute models for the use of the cultural approach (CCTD : 86). Then the community culture means villagers' identity in that each culture represents the identity of each community (CCTD : 71). This kind of idea is important for workers in the sense that NGOs carry weight with villagers' identity, local wisdom. To put it into concrete, the community identity is based on everyday life-style, belief, and way of thinking, etc. Thus a cultural approach is a way to work with villagers while understanding the culture as a life-style, way of grouping, way of thinking, and belief, etc.

If NGO workers try to understand the community culture, they will have to understand that they are humor, lazy and with all one's might, selfish and unselfish at the same time.

Then they are individualistic as well as not individualistic. They tend to change their attitude easily due to the conditions. Accordingly, if NGO workers take a cultural approach, they do not have to intend to drive the life-style of villagers change directly. Valuing the community culture is not a goal to directly change the villagers. Then, the villagers consequently change of life-style or the way of thinking through the process of development.

As to the Buddhist rural development NGOs, one must understand two kinds of Buddhism (see Ishii, Tambiah). One is beliefs of the monks or the intellectuals, including the students of university, which give importance to a meditation, a religious precept, unselfishness, liberation of self and so on. Another is belief of the people who ask for an interest in the present world by the merit-making. One can say that the people ask for an interest in the present world by the merit-making. That is to say, there are two kinds of Buddhism between a monk or the intellectual, elite, and the people in Thailand. Buddhist rural development NGO workers often confuse two kinds of Buddhism. These two kinds of Buddhism should be distinguished.

The monks or the intellectuals have made a group seeking for an ideal society in the present world according to the teachings of Buddha. However, as I mentioned before, the most important thing is that the Thai government has used Buddhism as logic of legitimacy to prevail their domination system. Consequently, Buddhist rural development NGOs spread the idealistic religion to the people, and in short, they manage to permeate the ethics favorable to the government in one side. The diligence, frugality and unity might be said the ethics of legitimacy not only for Buddhism but also for keeping men submitting to the nation. The populace believes the rebirth, namely reincarnation, and Karma, which is a cosmological idea of legitimacy of the present world order. One should not forget that the Thai royal system has been legitimated by Brahmanism and Buddhism. At the same time, one should not forget that the royal system could not easily be collapsed because the Thai people believes Buddhism and respects the royal nowadays.

As Potter said, every Thai village is not the same (Potter : 149). Every village has a different, unique history and environment. Accordingly, I take the community in the place of the village. It is very important for NGO workers to understand the community culture in advance, because understanding the community culture is to promote the identity of villagers who develop their own village or community by themselves. However, I emphasize that the community culture or identity is changeable. But the village community and the identity are not unchanged, and then can be only changed by villagers themselves.

I can say that the Thai people have had the idea of self-reliance, since the villagers have

protected themselves by themselves, but the nation has not protected them. The government set local every temple in a system of national Buddhist hierarchy, and one can say that the government has dominated local villagers through systematizing the Sangha (organization of monks). The people have not originally had the idea of Buddhism. Consequently, I cannot help saying that the community culture is not based on Buddhism. It might be said that the government compelled Buddhism into the traditional culture by political power (see Bobsbawm and Ranger) . Contrary to Sulak's intention, one must consider the traditional culture like the above. Notwithstanding, it might be said that Sulak tried to make Thai society into an ideal one. Consequently, I will be able to say that their endeavor is favorable to the government.

Notes

This paper is the paper presented at Pennsylvania State University, USA, in the 8 th World Congress of International Rural Sociological Association in 1992. I decided to publish the original paper without updating the content, although I just grammatically corrected the original version and changed the title. I cannot correct to update partly, since Thai NGOs' activities have been dynamically changed in the 1990s and we have today got many books and papers on it. Accordingly, I think that this paper has still significant to grasp the characteristics of Thai NGOs' activities to the early 1990s.

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Abbreviations

- NGO-CORD : NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development
- ODA : Official Developmental Assistance
- NIDA : National Institute of Development Administration of Thailand
- NGO : Non-Governmental Organization

GO : Governmental Organization

CUSRI : Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University

SRI : Social Research Institute, Chiang Mai University

RDI : Research and Development Institute, Khon Kaen University

CCTD : Catholic Council of Thailand for Development

THIRD : Thai Institute for Rural Development

NGO-CORD : NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development

TRRM : Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement

TDSC : Thai Development Support Committee

RUDOC : Rural Development Documentation Centre