

# **THE ROLES OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: EXPERIENCES FROM THAILAND**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and local communities have been dealing with the processes of development and globalization. Advocacy from NGOs has enhanced extensive public awareness and participation in development projects in Thailand. Many NGOs are involved in mobilizing people and campaigning against construction projects. NGOs are still regarded with some suspicion. This paper reviews past experiences of NGO activities in selected cases that represent contributions of NGOs to construction projects. It shows that NGOs do not always work to solve the problems faced by the locally affected people; hence causing conflicts between the two. NGOs have made positive contributions to development but, at the same time, there is a need to examine the impacts of their actions in order to facilitate effective advocacy and cooperation between stakeholders of development projects.

**Keyword:** Non-Government Organizations, development, projects, advocacy, Thailand.

## **INTRODUCTION**

For decades, the NGOs in Thailand have developed their roles and operational directions on development projects. NGOs have derived experiences from their work and learning process with local people who are mostly rural and urban disadvantaged groups. Advocacy by Thai NGOs have improved public awareness and participation in development. In many cases, such efforts have significant impact on the national policies stated in the social and economic development plans.

The word “development” has different meanings to different people and, thus, is not necessarily mutually agreed upon. How NGOs have approached and attempted to solve the problems related to development has been addressed. Additionally, it is not always easy to define the terms ‘non-governmental organization’ (NGO). [Jumbala and Mitprasat (1997)] offered observations towards a delineation of NGOs that view them as the organizations that focus on charitable activities and social welfare, which usually deal with human rights and the promotion of democracy. In contrast, the non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) emphasize on assisting groups of powerless and needy people to conceive and handle development projects. Throughout this paper, although there exist differences in the two types of organizations, NGDOs shall be purposively referred to as NGOs in Thailand’s development projects.

Previously, being anti-bureaucracy, NGOs were believed to be antagonistic and having negative attitudes toward officials in governmental organizations (GOs). Also, as an extension of their advocacy work, many Thai NGOs participated in anti-government protests at local and national levels by mobilizing people against the construction of development projects. In recent years, there has been dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation between the two groups. The government has recognized and accepted the role of NGOs and has requested more participation from the NGOs in the development process. However, conflicts still exist in development concepts and working strategies. Besides, as in many countries, many people regarded development NGOs in Thailand with some suspicion [Vichit-Vadakan, (2001)].

NGOs and development are situated within the wider processes of globalization and particular attention is paid to people's experiences of globalization in Thai contexts. From time to time, Thai NGOs and local communities have been dealing with the processes of development and globalization. However, the propriety of development projects and the roles of NGOs are still questionable, which include: How is development defined and by whom? How have global and local relations of power, both historically and in the present, shaped the meanings of development? What role(s) do NGOs and their members play in this redefinition of development? Do Thai NGOs always protest against development projects? Do they organize protests on behalf of the affected people or on their own initiative? Do people always support NGOs? How are development and globalization experienced differently by people in specific local contexts? Is there a future for development and if so, what might it look like? And, how may we incorporate the theoretical insights gained from cases studied into future practices? These questions are addressed in this paper.

## **THAI NGOs AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

Many Thai people have benefited from the services of NGOs. Some NGOs are accepted as charitable organizations and are popularly appreciated throughout the country, for organizing relief assistance to those in need. Beyond this, very few Thai people know what NGOs are. [Poomkacha (1995)] pointed out that Thai society does not have any special positive or negative attitude towards NGOs and further identified four roles of Thai development NGOs as: encouraging the strengthening of community institutions; educating the public about social problems; providing direct assistance; and, coordination of networking development role.

In Thailand, NGOs cover a wide range of groups with varied interests, objectives and activities. Historically, Thai NGOs have played a critical role in strengthening people's organizations and social movements, especially the popular democratic struggles in 1970s. In the subsequent decades, after the relaxation of political controls, NGOs have increased their participation in national development, socially, politically, and economically. Through this period, development NGOs has begun to realize and emphasize the development of human and community's capacity for self-reliance, aiming at poverty alleviation [Jumbala and Mitprasat, (1997)]. Many people believe that NGOs may be able to provide alternative means to tackle problems in development [Pongsapich, (1996)].

Compared with strong tension between NGOs and GOs in early 1980s, there has been recently more dialogue, exchange, and cooperation between the two groups. The NGOs in Thailand have great potential for active role in rural development. NGOs can not only provide a constructive link between local government and grassroots people but also ensure public participation in development [Prapatpaow, (2002)]. They can also play a crucial role in developing people's awareness and education as well as promote the development of local institutions. Government recognition on the role of NGOs in development activities is increasingly evident in the policy on promotion of local organization in rural development [Pongsapich, (1995a)].

Thailand's rapid economic growth brought several development projects which were accompanied by greater resource extraction, affecting the environment in unprecedented ways, with undesirable environmental controversies. Such development took a heavy toll on the environment and saw conflicts emerging both between groups of local people and between locals and outsiders. Movements for promoting better understanding and outcomes of environmental development issues comprise people from many social strata. In many cases, these people work together with NGOs to protect and rebuild their local environment, exert pressure on government to assist, refrain from environmentally damaging project, and attempt to have government reorient its development strategy [Jumbala and Mitprasat, (1997)].

Similarly, [Pongsapich (1995a)] pointed out that the impacts of environmental destruction, as a result from development constructions, have become more visible in the past decades. Environmentally sustainable development has increasingly become an important issue. Some NGOs are actively involved with local communities on local resources management and, occasionally, promotion and protest of hydropower dam construction. The Thai government adopted the concept of self-reliance and people's participation in promoting its development activities. However, NGOs and GOs may have different interpretations of the two concepts. Frequently, infrastructure projects are delayed due to disputes and conflicts between project developers, and communities and citizen groups who are not consulted in the process of site selection.

NGO activists argued that NGOs have emerged as an essential part of social movement in response to the 'mal-development' of the country and 'hot issues' problems [Poomkacha, (1995), Charoensuk, (1995). Dechalert (1999)] commented that the increased gaps between the rich and the poor, is the consequence of Thailand's rapid economic growth. The disputes over resources, and the abuse of power from the authorities are main causes of the conflicts between the rich and the poor, as well as the government and the villagers. These conflicts then lead to protests from the poor.

[Dechalert (1999)] further opined that the emergence and intervention of NGOs in social movements were claimed to be helpful for the people affected by development projects since the work of NGOs work has brought more diversity to Thai society. NGOs have come to reduce the power of bureaucracy, the rights of local communities have been defended, and the plight of the poor has been brought into public debate. Hence, NGOs themselves became resource to enable the poor to continue their struggles. [Poomkacha (1995)] emphasized that the main goal of NGOs is people empowerment, which includes assisting and encouraging people's self-confidence.

Most NGOs are involved in advocacy work, which is 'any attempt to influence the decisions of any institution elite on behalf of a collective interest' (Jenkins, 1987). In their advocacy work, Thai NGOs expect policy changes in favor of the poor. They also aim for 'social change', which would lead to a situation in which the people may get involved in decision-making processes, as well as 'change in attitudes' of their target groups [Dechalert, (1999). As argued by Covey (1995)], successful NGO advocacy work should strengthen the capacity of its beneficiaries to advocate for their own interests.

Organizations working on sustainable development and natural conservation groups are some of the networks established and maintained through regular exchanges of activities such as movements against dam construction. Both human and financial supports are pooled to help organize demonstrations, protests, or mass rallies, as in the case of Pak Mun Dam. Also, NGOs in Thailand have been able to stop or postpone construction of Nam Choan Dam and a few other dam construction projects initiated by the Royal Irrigation Department (RID) and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT).

Environmental groups have been fighting for natural resource conservation arguing that people have the right to keep resources such as forest areas undisturbed. It is now recognized that people's movements have sufficient power to have some influence on the decision-making process of some government agencies. Local communities can be encouraged by NGOs to make their voices heard. [Pongsapich, (1995a and 1996)].

Nevertheless, amidst the diversity of problem situations, experience of NGOs varies. Local people do not always appreciate the work of NGOs. Based on the main objectives of NGOs regarding public advocacy and the benefits of Thai grassroots, they can occasionally face situations where they fail to gain support from local people in opposing projects. NGOs have performed many good works, but those works are not always considered right for the locally affected people.

There are doubts about NGOs roles as facilitators and mediators. In Thailand, the public perception of NGOs is still a problem since many Thais have great misgiving about development NGOs, being often perceived as 'troublemakers' and 'foreign agents' [Vichit-Vadakan, (2001)]. Further, in many cases, it has been difficult to get a joint and conclusive agreement regarding the need to carry out development projects. This can clearly reflect either the achievement or failure of NGOs in presuming their role of public advocates.

## **THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF NGOs TO DEVELOPMENT PROJECT: CASE EXAMPLES**

The contributions of Thai NGOs to development project are well appreciated by people. However, reactions to NGOs work and operations vary from project to project. This paper presents cases of NGO-involved development projects that have social, economic, and environmental impacts. The first two cases are solely study through literature reviews while the latter two are the case studies as part of a larger study.

## **THE BTS SKYTRAIN PROJECT**

The Bangkok's elevated electrified BTS Sky train was dubbed Thailand's first modern mass transit system, fully operated by the private sector (Bangkok Mass Transit System Company Limited-BTSC). The BTS Sky train was officially opened for service on Dec 5, 1999. Its current 23.5 kilometers two-line system links key parts of the city. All stations and track way are on structures elevated above the medians of city streets that run through the central business district of the city. It was hoped that the project would gradually ease chronic traffic congestion in Bangkok Metropolis.

Initially, in 1992, the project was expected to be completed within four years. Unfortunately, the project needed seven years to become reality after facing protests from many parties, including bird watchers, academics, environmentalists, and the disabled. Environmentalists criticized its huge concrete pillars and rail beds snaking above Bangkok as an eyesore that spoils the cityscape. The project's original design was to run 15 kilometers with two routes, with a depot and maintenance center located at Lumpini Park. Criticism arose over the location of the depot, with concerns and complaints of possible air and visual pollution in the heart of Bangkok. It took three years to relocate the depot to Mor Chit bus terminal and the route was then extended to 23.5 kilometers [Bangkok Post, (1999)].

The BTS Skytrain Project was strongly opposed by a group of environmentalists led by Khunying Chodchoi Sophonpanich, who established the Thai Environmental and Community Development Association (TECDA), or 'Magic Eyes'. Magic eyes, together with its corporate members, aims to promote public awareness and social responsibility for conserving and improving Thailand's environmental condition as well as community affairs, well being, and problem solving (Magic Eyes, 2004). TECDA and other NGOs were concerned about possible environmental impacts caused by the Skytrain. They requested for and obtained a ruling from the Council of the State (COS) that the extension should be the subject of an environmental impact assessment prior to construction.

Another problem was that teachers, parents and pupils from Mater Dei School, successfully campaigned for the relocation of a station from the front of the school. Access to the BTS Skytrain services was also controversial. The original design of the project did not include elevators or escalators for disabled people. Such facility was neither included in the construction contract (Matichon, November 1998a, 1998b). A coalition of NGOs working for the disabled, carried campaigns leading to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) approving a budget allocation for construction of lifts for the disabled at five Skytrain stations [Matichon, (1999a)].

The relevant NGOs in the BTS Skytrain project worked as facilitators in both the promotion of public awareness on environmental impacts from the project and the response to requests of the people with disabilities. They worked strenuously in urging that project implementation be adjusted in order to improve public health, environmental protection and to improve the lives of citizens.

## **THE PAK MUN DAM PROJECT**

The Pak Mun Dam is a hydropower project located near the mouth of the Mun River that runs through Ubon Rachathani province in Northeast Thailand. The Pak Mun Dam Project is a multi-purpose 'run-of-the river' scheme, having main purpose of power generation and irrigation development. Proposed and implemented by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the project targeted to have a power generation capacity of 136 megawatts (MW). Financed by the World Bank, construction of the dam began in May 1991 and was completed in November 1994.

The Pak Mun Dam project affected the Mun River during and after construction. From the outset, the project was highly controversial. Between 1990 and 1997, thousands of people living in communities along the Mun River opposed the dam [SEARIN, (2003)] and blamed the project for affecting their livelihoods and occupations, especially fisheries, since the fish populations upstream of the dam site reduced drastically. Besides, the villagers also suffered floods causing loss of residential and agricultural land. The campaigns against the project by environmental groups, student associations, and public health groups focused on persuading the government to study the impacts from the project and to reveal all information relevant to such impacts to the public [Awakul, (2002)].

The Pak Mun Dam has also been a matter of international concern since the project was first proposed in the 1990s. Up until the World Bank approved its loan for the project in 1994, many organizations worked with the villagers affected by Pak Mun Dam to oppose World Bank funding. Since then, NGOs have worked to support the villager's demands for compensation, permanent opening of the dam's gates, and even decommissioning of the dam. The Southeast Asia River Network (SEARIN) commented that the actual output of the dam has been less than half of its expected capacity due to insufficient water. Moreover, the dam blocked the migration of fish, and a fish ladder, promoted by the World Bank's fisheries experts as a mitigation measure, has proved useless [SEARIN, (2003)]. The World Commission on Dams (WCD) also concluded that the dam failed to meet its projected benefits and had substantial impacts on fisheries. Economically, the Pak Mun Dam has not performed well [IRN, (2001), CSM (2000)].

NGOs have continuously assisted the people affected by the Pak Mun Dam Project since early campaigns against the dam started. In January 1994, before the impoundment of the dam, protesting villagers supported by NGOs came to Bangkok demanding compensation for families who depend on fishing to earn a living. In October 1994, over 2,000 protesting villagers demanded an annual monetary compensation and land for resettlement. In January 1995, the government agreed to compensate fishermen who lost their livelihood. Most importantly, in December 1995, villagers suffering from large-scale development projects decided to set up an umbrella group to address their problems under the name of the Assembly of the Poor (AOP) [Bangkok Post, (2000)].

Domestically, the people's protest and mass demonstrations against the dam has continued for more than 10 years. Pak Mun protesting villagers and the AOP, regarded as the largest people's organization in Thailand, had been demanding that the Pak Mun Dam be decommissioned and the river restored. In April 1998, the Cabinet Resolution cancelled a plan by the previous governments to offer compensation to 3,084 families affected by the

Pak Moon Dam construction. In March 1999, having occupied the Pak Mun dam site and established their living compound, the protestors said they would fight until the gates are permanently opened and the fisheries of the Mun River are restored [SEARIN, (2003)].

Having been criticized by the government and urban residents for demanding money, in late 1999 the protestors changed their demand to the decommissioning of the dam. By doing so, they were trying to show that they were fighting for life; not simply monetary compensation [MWJ, (2002)]. In April 2000, EGAT announced the government's compensation program had reached its final stage, and no more villagers would receive any money. However, negotiation over land compensation continued.

The AOP and the government agreed to hold a public forum in August 2000 in an attempt to solve the AOP's 16 grievances. It was hoped that the forum would bring about effective solutions and it would include representatives from all concerned groups. AOP also called on the government to let academic institutions arrange the hearing [The Nation, (2000a)]. At the forum, the government officials and AOP representatives traded accusations, denials and suggestions concerning the impacts of development projects and other natural-resource management issues. The neutral committee established by the government to address the villagers' demands seized the opportunity to propose more solutions such as amending of laws, hiring neutral team to conduct environmental-impact studies (EIA) rather than the projects' developers, with the hope to get right information for right decision-making [The Nation, (2000b)].

At the forum, the government officials and AOP representatives traded accusations, denials and suggestions concerning the impacts of development projects and other natural-resource management issues. However, after a four-hour public forum, AOP leaders insisted that their protests would continue until their problems are satisfactorily resolved. They believed that the government was determined to stick to its methods of development, and resist the structural and legal changes required to resolve their problems and protect the rights of the public in the future [The Nation, (2000b)].

In October 2001, 70 members of the AOP started a long march from the Pak Mun dam in Ubon Ratchathani to Government House to campaign for permanent opening of the dam's sluice gates [Bangkok Post, (2001)]. In September 2002, about 700 members of the Assembly of the Poor gathered at the Ubon Ratchathani Provincial Hall to continue their rally demanding that the Government order the EGAT to open the Pak Mun Dam sluice gates permanently in order to restore the nature of the Mun River [Khaosod, (2002)].

In 2001, the Thai government agreed to open the dam gates while studies were conducted on fisheries, social impacts and the contribution of the dam to Thailand's electricity supply. Thai government decided to close the gates for eight months each year, rejecting recommendations from impact study team from Ubon Ratchathani University that recommended continuous opening of the dam gates for at least five years [BWP, (2003)]. The Thai government made decision to shut the sluice gates from November 2002. Since then, the Pak Mun Dam gates have been opened for only four months per year starting in July 2003.

## **THE THA CHIN RIVER BARRAGE PROJECT**

The Tha Chin River is one of the main lifelines, flowing over a distance of 325 kilometers through the fertile agricultural areas in central region of Thailand. The Tha Chin River basin annually faces problems of water shortage and drought during the dry season that causes salinity intrusion. Also, the rapid expansion of industrial area in the middle part of the Tha Chin River Basin has caused high demand for raw water consumption whereas most of the area has no sewage treatment system. The undesirable result is decreased quality of water and polluted river [RID, (2002)]. The Tha Chin River suffered a pollution crisis in 2000 when its water became so contaminated by agricultural and industrial waste that more than 100,000 fish perished (Bangkok Post, 2002).

Having recognized and studied problems in the Tha Chin River since 1995, the Royal Irrigation Department (RID), proposed the construction of water retention barrage in the Tha Chin River. The purposes of the project are to retain and store fresh water for consumption by the local agricultural and industrial sectors, to prevent salinity intrusion and impacts from tidal effects, and to maintain natural conditions and improve the quality of water in the river.

From the outset, there had been relatively large numbers of people expressing objection to the project on the basis that the project's objectives were not wholly relevant to the actual problems experienced at the Tha Chin River basin and the construction of the barrage would neither solve the actual problems nor meet the people's actual needs. Furthermore, the EIA study showed that constructing a barrage across the river could worsen the condition of water in Tha Chin River because closing the gates would cause an accumulation of trapped waste substances in the river [RID, (2002)] and, hence, aggravate the river's already poor condition.

A local organization "We Love Tha Chin Society Nakhonpathom" (WLTSN) was the main activist in promoting awareness on environmental problems of the Tha Chin River. This non-governmental organization has been providing knowledge and education on social and environmental issues affecting their local communities in Tha Chin River basin. During the Tha Chin River water crisis in 2000, WLTSN played a leading role and was responsible for most activities in water resources protection in Nakhon Pathom province [Jiravitayaboon, (2003)].

Members of WLTSN are local residents along the Tha Chin River. WLTSN's activities focus on organizing public participation in river water management, school education in environmental programs, outreach on pollution reduction and prevention, and raising of the local people's environmental awareness via educative documents such as brochures. A study conducted by [Jiravitayaboon (2003)] concluded that WLTSN, as a provincial NGO, has high potential to participate in water quality monitoring program.

The WLTSN played a major role in encouraging local people to oppose the construction of barrages in the Tha Chin River. In campaigns and public participation activities, WLTSN received technical supports from the Environmental Non-Government Organization Assembly in organizing strategic methods and approaches to express opposition to the project, especially at the public hearing held in July 2002. Together with other environmental conservation groups, WLTSN also sought support from the Natural

Resources and Environment Ministry to improve the quality of their life and to scrap the barrage project. To date, the Tha Chin River Barrage project is on hold.

## **THE MAE WONG DAM PROJECT**

The proposed location of Mae Wong Dam Project is in the area of Mae Wong National Park, Nakhon Sawan province, in the lower part of northern Thailand. The Royal Irrigation Department (RID), as a project initiator, conducted project feasibility studies in 1982 [MWPHC, (2000)]. The study revealed that local people in the Mae Wong River Basin suffered severe problems related to annual floods and drought. The RID then developed policies and plans for development of the Mae Wong River Basin including underground water, small irrigation barrages, water storage ponds, and dams. The RID aimed to implement the Mae Wong Dam in order to solve local problems of water shortage, flooding, and poverty. Many locals also hoped that the dam would meet these goals and their quality of life could then be improved.

Having considered impacts of the project on the environment, such as the forest area and wildlife, as well as the investment cost, the Mae Wong Dam project feasibility study recommended a location for Mae Wong Dam construction at the edge of the Mae Wong National Park. The designed dam size is 57 meters high and 730 meters long. The dam can store 250 millions cubic meters of water. The estimated cost of the project was approximately 4,000 million Baht [MWPHC, (2000)]. Unfortunately, the Royal Forest Department was not supporting the project to be located in the national park area. Besides, as in other dam projects, NGOs were actively expressing opposition to the Mae Wong Dam Project. National and regional environmental conservation groups joined together to carry out campaign against the project.

The Sueb Nakhasathien Foundation (SNF) and Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT) were the leading NGOs that had major roles in participating the meetings and discussions with the project initiators, especially at the public hearing conducted in January 2000 at Nakhon Sawan province. Their expressions of controversies include problems of water shortage and floods, alternatives to solve the problems, suitability and benefits of the project, impacts of the project, and other relevant issues. The SNF and WFT, together with local environmental conservation activists, focused on preservation of the trees in Mae Wong National Park as a part of the conserved Western Forest Complex of Thailand as well as protection of rare wildlife living in the complex.

The RID organized a few meetings in the localities between 1993 and 1997. Around 600 people also registered to participate in the public hearing. At the hearing, according to the case study result, there were complaints that NGOs were not concerned much with the opinions from local people. The major focus of NGOs was on deforestation and evacuation of wildlife rather than problems faced by people living in the project localities. As aforementioned, problems related to floods and drought were the main concerns of the locals, mainly in Mae Wong and Lad Yao districts in Nakhon Sawan province. The groups of NGOs, led by SNF and WFT, were based in Bangkok. Other participating environmental conservation groups were based in Uthaitхани province, which is outside the project location. NGO campaigns against the Mae Wong Dam did not focus much on collaborating with locally affected people. In fact, there were very few attempts to work

closely with people in project setting. Instead, the NGOs chose to carry out activities at the regional and national level.

The locally affected people are of the opinion that NGOs opposing the project did not understand the actual problems that local villagers face since none of NGOs members were locals. NGOs had negative perception on the project, primarily because they did not consider the project's positive contribution to local communities. During the public hearing, the NGOs mainly expressed interest in forest and wildlife preservation. They were not willing to listen to the opinions of affected people supporting the project. The people also felt that they were not able to effectively present their support to the project while the NGO representatives, who were mostly academics and expert activists, were more influential.

In the Mae Wong case, NGOs failed to consult with and respond to the actual needs of the local people. As such, unlike in the other projects, they did not only fail to gain support from villagers but also proprietary to act on behalf of the people directly affected by the project. The NGOs did not perform advocacy work on behalf of the local people. There was no good or close relationship between NGOs and the locals. However, NGOs members commented that tempting incentives meant only for their localities misled the local people. So, the people were less concerned about forests, wildlife, and the country's natural resources as a whole than their own needs.

In addition to attempts to oppose dam projects in the country, NGO leaders often take a strategic approach to influencing top government officials. In December 2002, the secretary general of WFT issued a letter to the minister of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment requesting revision on dam construction projects in Thailand, emphasizing on irregularities in the initiation of such projects.

The Mae Wong Dam Project was suspended in 2001 when the National Environmental Board (NEB) made a resolution on a revision on the project's feasibility study result. It is currently awaiting re-consideration by the NEB.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the past decade, Thai NGOs have grown in number and diversified their activities while gaining increased public acceptance. Some NGOs played important roles in evaluating the projects initiated by the government. Their main emphasis includes assisting groups of powerless and needy people to conceive and handle state development projects. NGOs are generally expected to be people's advocates in dealing with project-related issues such as elimination or minimization of adverse effects from projects and to help the process of compensation. The roles of NGOs in Thailand were therefore generally satisfactory. However, given the differences in perceptions, concerns and interests, dissatisfactions do exist. The cases reported give different perspectives on NGOs performance in their advocacy work on behalf of the people, and for national development.

NGOs involved in the BTS Skytrain project had two areas of interest; environment and the right of the disabled. On the environmental front, NGOs successfully raised public

awareness in protecting the green areas and inhabitants of the park in the heart of the city from being developed as a depot for the trains. They influenced the relocation of the depot to the more proper location. In concern of disabled people's social right, the relevant NGOs actively called for consideration from the city's administration and the Skytrain project owners regarding provision of facilities for the disabled. Sustained efforts of the NGOs eventually resulted in installation of elevators for the disabled at five BTS Skytrain stations.

In the case of the Pak Pun Dam, it was commented that some of the concerned government agencies failed to do their jobs, such as increasing fish stock and assisting local fishermen to adapt to the changed ecosystem. NGOs assisted people to be able to continue their lives as fishermen even with the dam. Through conflicts and tensions of people's opposition to the project, NGOs had a constructive role in helping to direct and advise the movements. NGOs achieved their aims in making the government to respond to the demands for addressing the grievances of the people affected by the project. The AOP, the leading NGO in opposing Pak Mun Dam project, managed to make agreement with the government to hold a public forum aiming to directly discuss the project's controversial issues. That event was regarded as a new chapter in the development of participatory democracy because it was the country's first ever-public forum. By including representatives from all concerned groups, it was hoped that the forum would bring about effective solutions. Though no solutions were reached, many participants said they believed the forum was a success for allowing both sides to publicly air their views.

In the case of Tha Chin River Barrage Project, local NGOs were the main organizers of activities promoting awareness on environmental problems and encouraging local people to oppose the project. The NGOs provided knowledge and education on social and environmental issues affecting their local communities as well as created small groups of locals with same interest and organized public participation in river water management, school education in environmental management, outreach on pollution reduction and prevention. With organized procedures and technical assistance from other environmental conservation groups, the NGOs had obvious influence when expressing local problems, and other relevant issues, at the project's public hearing where all stakeholders had formal opportunities to present their views about the project.

The NGOs involved in the Mae Wong Dam Project were mainly environmental and wildlife conservation activists. They were concerned more about the effects of the project at regional and national level. These NGOs carried out their campaigns via media, meetings with government agencies, and public hearing etc. to oppose the project. The NGOs suggested that the project owner should solve local problems by using other alternatives rather than by building a large dam in the national park. However, the local people were not satisfied with the activities of NGOs. The locally affected people were not well linked with the NGOs who were considered as outsiders. Local people did not understand why NGOs opposed the project, which they believed to be good for local communities. Based on beliefs that NGOs were not really concerned about local problems, the local people disliked the actions of NGOs. Thus it is noted that weak relationship and inadequate information from NGOs can cause misunderstanding and dissatisfaction from the local people.

The four cases give both positive and negative images of NGOs in development projects. Given that major the objectives of NGOs include resolution of economic, social, and

environmental problems, the point for concern is what should the appropriate scale of NGOs role if they wish to act as advocates the people, locally or publicly. Acceptability from the people, especially from the affected ones, together with thorough knowledge on resolution of problems and good will toward the country's development can also be factors considered in proprietary of NGOs roles in advocacy work on projects. NGOs can narrow the gap between state agencies and villagers through partnership with the government could act as partners in helping villagers affected by state projects to make a living.

## **SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The roles of NGOs include solving problems for the targeted people, socio-economic appraisal, public education, lobbying, advocacy etc. Seemingly, the government and general public have acknowledged these roles of NGOs. However, when problems are multifaceted and in combination with local influence and separate exploitative national policies, roles and achievement of many of NGOs working within a community context seem to be unclear.

NGOs should learn to share experiences among themselves together with promoting network of community leaders and organizations to exchange viewpoints on development and experiences. Mutual learning with communities would enable NGOs to gain deeper understanding of the situation in local communities. Empowering community is essential since it is the people themselves who need to think about the issues and make linkages, not the outside NGOs workers. Multilevel advocacy work proved supportive.

In the Thai context, challenging the mainstream development trend is one of the most legitimate roles for NGOs in the future. NGOs need to enhance their work in public education to broaden their support-base as well as to improve their research and information regarding impacts of government development policies. There is a need to review the performance of NGOs involved in development projects with a view to determine whether they are really have local or national interests. Besides, approaching the public with broader and more unified strategy is essential in acquiring support for their operations.

Thailand's future social and economic development is multi-dimensional. The Thai society still needs NGOs as a catalyst to stimulate the people to understand the changes and to develop a globalization strategy. Otherwise, disadvantaged people would become victims of development. However, in some cases, varied identities and diversified aspiration of NGOs have made it difficult for NGOs to come together and present viable and sustainable alternatives to people-oriented developments.

Only with good understanding of the problems, strong service orientation, commitment to reduce poverty and injustice, and clear and powerful communication of their values, can NGOs have positive impact on Thai society. Collaboration, cooperation, transparency, and sincerity of relevant parties in development programs would lead to successful development. Time and efforts are required in order to obtain mutual understanding which will result in more effective cooperation in the future.

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