

A Perspective on Thailand

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Introduction

Before the 1997 economic crash, Thailand enjoyed high economic growth rates, and economic indicators, such as employment, income, and industrialization were all moving in a positive direction. Thailand was viewed as an example for other countries in the region to follow. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it appeared that Thailand was successfully making progress on the pathway towards economic development and poverty alleviation. However, with the crash, the economic success and the optimistic view of the future burst in what is sometimes referred to as the “bubble economy.” With hindsight, it was clear that such rapid growth could not be sustained, that in fact much of the growth was not real but rather based on inflated valuations. Importantly, it also became apparent that the social and environmental consequences of the rapid growth phase were extremely serious.

The experience of Thailand shows how closely economic development is linked to environmental degradation, unless very strong protective measures are taken. It has become clear that the economic growth that took place during the 1980s and 1990s in the Asian region has had a dramatic, even devastating, effect on the region’s environment. People in urban environments suffer deteriorating air quality, worsening water quality, and growing mountains of waste. The river systems are polluted, soil is losing its fertility, forest cover is declining, deserts are spreading, resources are being depleted, and biodiversity is being lost everywhere. The situation is dire and worsening, and global issues of climate change, ozone depletion, and acid rain compound it. Furthermore, a range of non-environmental challenges must be faced: health issues such as AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis; and social issues of poverty alleviation, drug use, education reform, and the protection of minority groups, local cultures, and traditions.

This paper firstly provides some background information on Thailand before briefly looking at Thailand’s efforts in international environmental cooperation. This will be followed by a description of the general environmental situation in Thailand, the problem areas it is facing, and the changes taking place in the field of environmental policy. Thailand’s contribution to regional environmental management will be described on the basis of a number of ratified international agreements, and finally, some ideas on best practice are shared with recommendations on how to address the priority areas of concern.

Background Information

This section provides brief background information about Thailand today: its population, geography, the political system, the economy, and the kind of social development taking place.³⁵

Population

With a population of 62 million people and covering an area of 514,000 square kilometers, Thailand shares borders with Myanmar, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, and Malaysia. It has a coastline of 2,420 kilometers on the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. Ninety-four percent of the population is Thai-speaking Buddhist, but in the southern provinces near the Malaysian border, the majority of the population is Muslim, and in the mountains of the northern region, over half a million hill tribe people speak distinct languages. People of Chinese origin, which make up around 15 percent of the total population, enhance the nation's diversity. This group speaks Thai, is integrated into the general population, is spread throughout the country, and identifies itself as Thai. Over six million people are registered as living in the capital Bangkok, but when the unregistered, migrant population is included, the population is generally accepted to be over ten million.

Geography

Geographically, Thailand is divided into four regions. The fertile central region is sometimes referred to as the "rice bowl," but also includes the Bangkok Metropolitan Region and the Chao Phrya River Basin that flows into the Gulf of Thailand. The mountainous northern region is scenic and popular with tourists, but the once abundant forests of the region have been greatly reduced and the land converted to agricultural uses. Bounded on the north and east by the Mekong River, the northeastern region is the poorest economically, with irregular rainfall and low soil quality, but is famous for its food specialties and its rich, fun-loving culture. The southeastern region too has poor soils, but its high rainfall allows fruit, maize, and cassava crops to grow well. Its long coastline provides opportunities for fishing and tourists. With the highest rainfall in the country, the southern peninsula is the principal rubber-growing area. As in the north, its once richly forested areas have been seriously exploited and cleared, causing severe flooding and soil erosion.

Politics

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, with its most recent constitution, referred to as the "people's constitution" signed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej on 11 October 1997. The Constitution has set an agenda of political reform, in which the decentralization of administrative functions is to take place. This reform reverses a long trend of centralization and nation building, indicating political self-assurance and stability. However, decentralization and good governance are much debated topics. The

³⁵ Information from this section is mostly taken from the UN web site providing country background information on Thailand (<http://www.un.or.th/>)

decentralization policy will result in some tasks, functions, personnel, and budget being devolved from central government to local government units, such as the Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAO). Furthermore, the Constitution encourages the participation of civic groups in development planning and decision-making through the TAO and other community empowerment initiatives.

Economy

Thailand is rich in natural resources: tin, rubber, natural gas, tungsten, tantalum, timber, lead, fish, gypsum, lignite, fluorite, and arable land. But among the environmental issues it faces is the depletion of these natural resources, air pollution from vehicle emissions, water pollution from organic and factory wastes, deforestation, soil erosion, wildlife populations threatened by illegal hunting, and land subsidence in Bangkok due to excessive use of groundwater resources.

Thailand is a rapidly industrializing agricultural country. Arable land makes up one-third of the total land area, forests and woodland one-quarter, permanent crops about 6 percent, and permanent pastures 2 percent. Irrigation is by far the largest user of water, and the volume continues to grow — the 48,171 cubic meters in 1993 is expected to increase to 61,746 cubic meters in 2006. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of the workforce (54 percent) is engaged in the agricultural sector, followed by services (31 percent) and industry (15 percent, 1996 est.). Nevertheless, GDP by sector shows the importance of industry to the economy — industry comprises 40 percent of GDP, while agriculture accounts for 10 percent and services 49 percent (2001 est.).³⁶

Prior to the financial and economic crisis that hit the country in July 1997, Thailand had experienced economic growth averaging 8 percent annually for two decades, and great progress was made in decreasing the percentage of people living in poverty, which fell from 32.6 percent in 1988 to 11.4 percent in 1996. While this sustained growth improved average incomes, the improvement was not uniform — the rich gained more, thus worsening income inequalities, and Bangkokians and people in other urban centers gained more than people in rural areas.

The economic crisis had a particularly strong impact on the vulnerable groups of society — the poor and those in remote rural communities — and led to the realization that these people needed to be empowered to enable them to participate more actively in future growth and development. Also, there was recognition that the nation needed to adopt a longer term and more holistic vision of development, where sustainable growth is based on human development, good governance, environment, and well-managed economic policy.

Thai society continues to be characterized by poverty and inequality, and the 1997 crisis showed the existence of deep, regional, social, and urban/rural divides. While the

³⁶ http://www.photius.com/wfb2000/countries/thailand/thailand_geography.html, http://www.rid.go.th/eng/kwter-dp_eg.htm, and <http://www.info.tdri.or.th/>

incidence of poverty declined steadily prior to 1997, since the crisis the trend has been reversed, with 15.9 percent of the population now living below the poverty line.

Social Development

The National Economic and Social Development Board's (NESDB's) Eighth Plan proposes that families and communities should be brought together to pursue self-development programs, so that they can play an active role in local development. This process can be supported through the promotion of local culture and by the mass media, and facilitated by the government. The Plan offers several strategies:

- Encourage communities to develop capabilities to participate in local development;
- Increase employment opportunities in rural areas;
- Promote education, public awareness, and training to ensure economic competitiveness for fostering human development and improving quality of life;
- Develop the local economy of each area based on its potential, to generate new economic opportunities and thus improve the quality of life;
- Establish a production base responsive to changes in global markets, focusing on community-based industries.

Thailand's Ninth National Plan articulates its development priorities for the period 2002-2006, whereby the successes and failures of the Eight Plan and the political and socio-economic developments since 1997 are shaping its direction. The plan encapsulates a people-centered vision of development for Thailand, which complements the measures introduced to strengthen the economic and social foundations for long-term sustainable growth. Its main goals are poverty alleviation, good governance, sustainability, stability, and strengthening development foundations. These priorities were formulated by the government in consultation with the private sector, NGOs and civil society at the regional and local levels. Discussions encompass increased participation and self-sufficiency, and the Ninth Plan emphasizes the importance of the role of civil society in the decision-making process.

Acting on such policy is more difficult than stating it however, as illustrated by the following two examples:³⁷

- The long running issues of the gas pipeline at Songkla on the Thai-Malaysian border and the Pak Mool Dam show the difficulties the government has in actually engaging constructively with "the private sector, NGOs and civil society at the regional and local levels." Consulting does not mean developing a project and announcing it to the community for comment. It should encompass full public participation at the earliest planning stages of a project. Where ecosystems or environments are endangered, comprehensive and independent environmental impact assessments (EIAs) need to be undertaken with local community participation. While such a participatory approach may appear time consuming, experience shows that where it does not occur, conflict can continue for years, the project can be held up seemingly indefinitely and added costs can accumulate. The Pak Mool Dam is a case in point — a project with little initial community

³⁷ *The Nation* Thursday 19 December 2002 and Friday 20 December 2002

participation. The Prime Minister now accuses NGOs, who along with villagers and a study by the Ubon Ratchathani University are calling for the sluice gates to be opened permanently, of “putting words into the mouths of villagers” and accepting foreign money for their own benefit. Other statements by the Prime Minister do not show preparedness for open discussion: “I know who is good or bad,” and “Villagers should speak out for themselves rather than repeating a taped message.”

- The second example concerns local community radio, the establishment of which would give local communities a powerful voice on their issues, but which the government also sees as a potential source of problems. The constitution states that community radio should get 20 percent of the wavelengths and the Cabinet has already agreed to legalise the stations. However, the Prime Minister now plans to grant the Tambol Administration Organisations (TAO) the right to run community radio stations. The National Community Radio Federation, a movement seeking legal status for underground rural radio operators, claims that this is tantamount to giving the stations to the ruling party, not the people, and a betrayal of the concept of promoting independent, grassroots media.

Many people believe that the answers to Thailand’s problems lie in education. However, reform of the education system continues to present a key challenge for Thailand. The Education Reform Commission continues its work to implement the provisions called for under the 1999 National Education Act.

This brief background information gives some idea about the direction that Thailand is moving, but it is clear that the changes to Thai society are great and the implementation of new policies is challenging. The following section looks at Thailand from the point of view of international environmental cooperation.

International Environmental Cooperation

Thailand is a member of a wide range of regional and international organizations including Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asian Development Bank (ADB), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Mekong River Commission (MRC), many United Nations (UN) organizations,³⁸ World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organization (WTO), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), International Labor Organization (ILO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Organization of Migration (IOM), and many more. In addition, Bangkok is home to UN-ESCAP, and the current head of the WTO is a Thai national. Thailand was the Chair of the Standing Committee of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) from mid-1999 to mid-2000, and Thailand was also the chair of the ASEAN Economic Ministries (AEM) forum for a one-year period from October 2000. In May 2000,

³⁸ Some of which include: the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission (UNIKOM), UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH), UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and United Nations University (UNU).

Thailand hosted the Annual Board of Governors meeting of the ADB. These events demonstrate Thailand's regional focus and agenda, where it sees itself as the hub of the region, being able to benefit others through cooperation whilst at the same time gaining benefits.

It is clear that in this age of globalization and increasing interdependency between nations, awareness is growing in Thailand as elsewhere that the government, its institutions, and the community all have a global as well as a local responsibility towards environmental protection and the sustainable use of resources. Ideas such as 'think globally, act locally,' have been reborn to encourage 'think globally, act globally' and 'think locally, act locally.' In this context, Thailand, faced with mounting environmental deterioration in a number of sectors, is taking a multi-faceted approach towards local and global action.

Thailand's geopolitical position at the center of the Asia-Pacific Region gives it an important role to play in the region's economic, social, and political development. In addition, trade and tourism are important income-generating activities for Thailand and this aspect is tending to dominate international relations in the region as elsewhere.

As a means of promoting international cooperation, binding international conventions can be viewed as a tool aimed at preventing and mitigating cross-border environmental problems through the ratification of appropriate international environmental laws. As a member of the world community, Thailand has demonstrated its commitment by participating in these international activities, and by meeting its international obligations.

The list of major agreements and conventions (*see Box 1*) entered into by successive governments in Thailand shows that the commitment to meeting international obligations regarding environmental protection and sustainable development has extended over a period of more than 40 years. The range of agreements covers significant areas of marine pollution, heritage protection, air pollution, nature conservation, climate change, and ozone depletion. It is significant that these agreements recognize that environmental protection and sustainable development are indeed global problems that must be tackled by international cooperation.

Box 1: A selection of international agreements signed or in the process of being signed by the Thai government since 1969

Signed international agreements:

- International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution of the Sea by Oil (as amended on 11 April 1962 and 21 October 1969), London, 1954
- Agreement Concerning Cooperation in Marine Fishing, Warsaw, 1962
- International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage (as amended), Brussels, 1971
- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, 1971
- Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, Paris, 1972

- Convention Concerning the Protection of Workers Against Occupational Hazards in the Working Environment Due to Air Pollution, Noise and Vibration, Geneva, 1977
- Protocol for the Conservation and Management of the Protected Marine and Coastal Areas of the South-East Pacific, Paipa, 1989
- Association of South East Asian Nations Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, Kuala Lumpur, 1985
- Agreement on the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok 1988
- Convention Concerning Safety in the Use of Chemicals at Work, Geneva, 1990
- Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, Espoo, 1991
- United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, New York, 1992
- Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, Montreal, 1987
- Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Resource Activities, Wellington, 1988
- Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, Basel, 1989
- International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation, London, 1990

International agreements in the process of being signed, but still undergoing some discussion:

- Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, 1997
- The Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992

Thailand has not yet ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), as a number of Thai NGOs and civil society groups have lobbied Parliament against it, citing that the instrument encroaches on Thai sovereignty.³⁹ Nevertheless, the nation's internal preparation has been substantially developed both in law and responsible agency matters. The debate about the positive and negative impacts of being a CBD member is still of high community interest.

In 1998, Thailand ratified the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Preparation is underway to propose an additional nine wetlands as Ramsar sites, including: marshland, peat swamp forest, mangrove and muddy beach. Coordinating and focal points for outreach programs have also been set up.

In 1997, Thailand ratified the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal. Thai representatives attended the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), Technical Working Group (TWG), and other working group meetings as required under the agreement. At present, preparation is underway for ratification of the Protocol on the Liability from Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste and their Disposal.

While the government has shown some willingness to be a party to international conventions, a number of suggestions can be made to further the cause of multilateral cooperation and the promotion of civil society networks:

- Raising public awareness of issues together with collecting the most up to date information about endangered species and biodiversity should be prioritized, as well

³⁹ http://www.unescap.org/drpadd/vc/orientation/M3anx_th_cbd_imp.htm

as providing full details regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and matters that are directly linked to the Biosafety Protocol;

- Promoting community understanding about the consequences of being, as opposed to not being, a party member of the Convention on Biological Diversity;
- Promoting cooperation between communities in encouraging local participation activities in outreach programs as described in the Ramsar Convention;
- Support for the involvement of the private business sector in the development of hazardous waste management technology. Promotion of cleaner technology and the prevention and control of hazardous waste should be considered as a main policy through utilizing laws and encouraging community involvement.

It is clear that many environmental issues are global in nature and require international cooperation in order that they may be resolved. As an agricultural but newly industrializing economy, Thailand still has an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of other countries and to address environmental problems before they arise.

General Environmental Situation and Problem Areas

As already discussed, the 1997 Thai Constitution mandates the decentralization of authority to local governments and the promotion of civil society groups. In addition, the Sub-District (tambol) Administrative Organization Act of 1994 provides for the legal incorporation of local government units, empowering them to initiate and participate in all sustainable development programs.

The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), and the National Environmental Board (NEB) are the mechanisms by which Thailand coordinates sustainable development, and for the past 25 years the emphasis has been on environmental sustainability, poverty alleviation, and improving quality of life. In addition, research institutions, academia, the private sector, and civil society groups representing a wide cross-section of experts are consulted regularly regarding environmental development policies even though they are not officially represented in the NESDB or NEB.

During this period, the government has developed policies and programs, and legislated extensively in areas such as combating poverty, atmosphere, land use planning, forest and deforestation, desertification and drought, sustainable mountain development, sustainable agriculture, biological diversity, biotechnology, oceans and coastal areas, freshwater management, toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes, solid wastes, radioactive wastes, energy, transport, sustainable tourism, capacity building, education, and training, as well as raising awareness of these issues in the community.

As a developing country, rich in natural resources and with an economy strongly dependent on primary industries and tourism, the following are the areas that are most environmentally threatened. Domestically, the priority areas of concern include:

- Farmers face soil degradation and soil erosion, as well as water shortages in the dry season, especially in the north and the northeast parts of the country. Farmers face

flooding in the wet season. In addition, the salinisation of agricultural land is occurring as a result of changes in groundwater levels and increasingly from freshwater shrimp farming.

- Water pollution and water shortage is critical in a number of catchments such as the lower Chao Phraya, Ta Chin, and Mae Klong Rivers.
- Because of its dominant position in Thailand, Bangkok has particular problems: air pollution levels often exceed Thailand's air quality standards; the generation of solid waste and night soil presents a growing management problem; and excessive use of groundwater is leading to subsidence and salt-water intrusion. Increasingly, other cities in Thailand (Chiang Mai, Hat Yai for example), see Bangkok as a model for development and are attempting to emulate this success without addressing the less positive aspects of growth.
- Severe coastal erosion often results from tourist developments, and activities such as sea walking to view corals causes great damage to marine ecosystems. Fish catches continue to exceed the natural replacement capacity of the stock.
- Tourism is an important growth industry in Thailand, providing many jobs around the country. The industry is largely based on the natural beauty of Thailand's island, coastal, forest, mountain, and river ecosystems. However, its continued expansion is putting enormous pressure on all of these natural resources, and causing social disruption to traditional village lifestyles. Much discussion revolves around the idea of 'ecotourism,' and the parties continue to argue about its definition, its level of sustainability, and to question whether it is really beneficial to local communities or merely exploitative.
- Natural forest cover is declining as encroachment and illegal tree cutting continue.
- Habitat loss is impacting on biodiversity and increasing the threat of species extinction.
- Conflict within communities has been aroused by the proposed development of a number of large infrastructure projects, such as the waste water treatment plant in Samut Prakan, the gas pipeline project in Songkla, and the planned power plant in Prachuab Kiri Khan. In this respect, we have seen that a potential for violence exists within Thai society. This is particularly the case where the use of natural resources is linked with poverty, poor governance, lack of public disclosure, corruption, and generally where the bureaucratic system has not offered an efficient method of public participation in the decision-making process.

In addition, the community is becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about potential health dangers. Examples include the use of pesticides and other chemicals in the agricultural industry where residues often remain on products sold in the marketplace; toxic wastes and polluted waste water from industry; and, particularly in urban areas, worsening air pollution events. More recently concern has been raised about genetically modified and transgenic organisms. The examples given here are all the result of human activity, but while consumers and the general public often feel that their health is being compromised by these practices, many see that they have little option or control in choosing a healthier lifestyle. Examples are many: the farmer who mixes chemicals with his bare hands, the young people pumping petrol in the gas station breathing highly toxic petrol fumes, the carpet layers, painters and carpenters breathing toxic glues and paints in

their workplace, the people selling goods on the side of congested roads breathing carbon monoxide from car exhausts. People are either unaware of the dangers, fear losing their jobs, or claim they “don’t care” or that the situation is only temporary. In this regard, questions are raised of social justice and equity, of corruption and greed, and can be seen as examples of violations to workers rights and human rights. The examples show that there is an acute need for awareness raising through environmental education and community empowerment.

While appearing to be local in nature, the environmental problems faced in Thailand are also both regional and global. Thus, the protection of biodiversity, the sustainable management of natural resources, and the reduction of air and water pollution can be addressed at all levels of government.

Developments in the Policy and Institutional Setting

The 1997 Constitution gives the people the right to participate in the management of their local environments, and through laws, such as the proposed Community Forest Act and the Water Resources Act, the government encourages the involvement of the private sector and local communities in addressing relevant issues.

At the policy level, the government manages the Environmental Quality Management Plan (1999 - 2006) and at the performance level, for example, it maintains and administers the wastewater treatment system, and the application of ISO 14000 and Clean Technology. Furthermore, a number of government policies are directed toward strengthening local administrations and promoting tourism.

Governments have many opportunities to intervene in protecting the environment, but often seem to lack the political will. The Thai government is attempting to strengthen the ability of local organizations to manage their own local environment, but often only if it is politically expedient, as in the issue of community radio discussed earlier. Furthermore, governments can play an important role in the use of monetary policy, such as the application of environmental taxes based on the polluter pays principle, or by charging for services such as for waste collection and treatment. Politically, though, this is not an easy option. A third option is for governments to support and encourage the community to participate in environmental projects and activities in an appropriate way by providing an enabling infrastructure.

While the government claims to be taking action in these areas, it must be recognized that the problem is not solved by merely adopting practices from other countries without questioning their suitability to the situation in Thailand. For example, the question of how to involve the Thai community in the decision-making process cannot yield the same answer as it would if posed in a highly educated European country with a vocal population having a long history of demanding the right to participate. This is a time of fundamental change in Thailand, and while the government is at least accepting the concept of community involvement in the decision-making process, they must also

provide the opportunities for participation, and play an educative role in participatory democracy.

As good as it may be, government scandals and charges of ministerial and government officer corruption appear in the media on a daily basis. Whether these charges are proven or not, over time the public often develops a cynical view of government and believes neither the politicians, nor the courts, nor the media. The situation is not helped by a government whose motto seems to be a paternalistic “don’t argue with me, trust me, I am looking after you.” For the government to gain the confidence of communities, questions of good governance must be able to be discussed openly. This includes rule of law, accountability, transparency in how decisions are made, participation, and integrity. Dr Prasit Domrongchai of the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) writes:

“Corruption has long deteriorated Thai society and caused political turmoil. Every Coup D’Etat often refers to the evidence of corruption. Good Governance can lessen, if not eliminate, all forms of corruption and corrupt practices. But there must be an agent to lay GG foundation down, the National Counter Corruption Commission is a part. With three attributions: Faithful, Ally and Honesty Awareness, one hopes to install Good Governance and to eradicate corruption successfully.”⁴⁰

Again, the difficulty is in translating policy into practice. The following section looks at Thailand’s contribution to regional environmental management based on a number of international agreements.

Contribution to Regional Environmental Management: Cooperation on the Mekong River⁴¹

In 1995, Thailand joined Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam in establishing the Mekong River Commission (MRC). The Commission also maintains regular dialogue with the two upper states of the Mekong River Basin, China and Myanmar. The aim of the Commission is to “promote and coordinate sustainable management and development of water and related resources for the countries’ mutual benefit and the people’s well-being by implementing strategic programmes and activities and providing scientific information and policy advice.” The MRC member countries agree to cooperate in all fields of sustainable development, utilisation, management, and conservation of the water and related resources of the Mekong River Basin, such as navigation, flood control, fisheries, agriculture, hydropower, and environmental protection.

While the ideals may be lofty, the reality shows how difficult river basin cooperation is. Two major issues of sustainability that the MRC has not been able to address are China’s insistence on building eight dams across the Mekong in the Yunnan Province, and the blasting of rapids in Thailand and Laos to allow year round navigation. China claims that

⁴⁰ Dr Prasit Damrongchai *Good Governance & Corruption in Thailand*
http://www.info.tdri.or.th/reports/os_paper/prasit_e.pdf

⁴¹ <http://www.mrcmekong.org/>

the hydro dams are a key part of its plans for economic development and poverty alleviation. However, experience shows that big dams have enormous social and environmental impacts on local and downstream inhabitants, and these concerns have not been given due consideration.

More than 100 rapids are set for demolition, in a 350-kilometre section of the Mekong River running through China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand under the 200-million-baht plan, including 13 between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong in Thailand. A number of environmental problems have been identified, including the destruction of the breeding grounds of the giant river catfish, the loss of water plants known as kai (a source of food for fish and local people alike), the erosion of river banks and damage to riverside plantations from faster flowing river, and the damage to the livelihoods and health of 100,000 people who rely on fish for protein due to the reduction of fish in the river.⁴²

It seems that while cooperation along the Mekong River is occurring at the international level, some distance still remains between the government and local people, and a number of issues have been raised:⁴³ Firstly, local people, whose lives depend on the Mekong, were not informed about the project or participated in any way in the decision to carry out the blasting. Secondly, the environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not based on assessments of the full range of potential impacts, ignoring impacts on fisheries, society, tradition, and the aquatic ecosystems. Thirdly, blasting the rapids will destroy the resources and security of local people.

It is claimed that clearing the reefs would enable 500-tonne ships to ply the river year-round. However, most trade between Thailand and Laos could be carried in 30- to 100-tonne ships. Clearing the rapids would mainly benefit China, which owns most of the bigger ships plying the river during the wet season.

Another body on the Mekong River is the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), which includes the four upper catchment countries, Laos, Thailand, China and Myanmar. As discussed in this section, the GMS came to a common agreement on the use of the upper Mekong River for navigation purposes, a decision creating grave environmental consequences.

Cooperation on environmental issues at the international level is difficult because of national self-interest, and because each government has the mandate to protect the best interests of its own people. Governments must identify and balance the advantages and disadvantages from an international, national, and local point of view, but too often in the past, the local perspective has been neglected. The following section looks at the environmental situation in Thailand and those areas where problems are arising.

⁴² Theerawat Khamthita, Bangkok Post. June 3, 2002

⁴³ <http://www.rwesa.org/statement/statement20021212b.html>

Best Practices and Future Prospects

A number of positive developments are evident:

- The establishment of the Natural Resources and the Environment Ministry in itself will not change anything, but looking positively, it does give environmental interests a voice at Cabinet level and thus raises the profile of environmental and natural resource issues.
- The Social Investment Fund, financed by a World Bank loan of \$300 million, was approved in 1998 to help mitigate the adverse social impacts of the economic crisis of the poor and unemployed. The fund works to strengthen civil society groups by supporting projects proposed by community groups, local governments, and NGOs.
- In the debate on globalization versus localization, His Majesty the King's words calling for more independence and self-sufficiency, with less reliance on international markets, carry a lot of weight in the community and have generated widespread debate together with awareness raising of the issues.
- The growth of grassroots movements is clearly evident in issues such as the Community Forest Bill, and civil society has built networks on a wide range of topics: environment, sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, and so on. Civic Forum and other community based organizations have been set up around the country, and while some groups are more effective than others, the movement works from a wide base, showing that people want to participate in the decisions that will affect their lives.
- The drafting process of the National Health Bill, the growth in the process of health impact assessment, and efforts towards public disclosure are indicative of the government's attitude toward addressing the public's concerns over health issues.

Generally, civil society groups face a lack of resources and a lack of sufficient accurate information to allow them to operate efficiently. Their work is further hampered by a lack of transparency and poor accountability in the government sector, a lack of coordination between government departments, and poor access, or knowledge of how to access, environmental funding opportunities.

In this regard, an area of priority is for government agencies to provide opportunities for civil society groups to be involved and participate in government or state-enterprise processes, thus providing them with access to budgets, information, and cooperation, including the promotion of positive attitudes towards such groups. Additionally, the government can continue to intensify its support for cooperation between civil society groups and government agencies in the management of natural resources and in solving environmental problems.

Priority areas for the coming years remain as in previous years: combating poverty, water resource management, natural resource management, sustainable agriculture and rural development, conservation of biological diversity, management of biotechnology and GMOs, safer use of toxic chemicals, managing hazardous wastes, and building partnerships with civil society groups.

Finally, some recommendations which would be helpful in addressing the listed areas of priority:

- The sustainable management of natural resources requires a broad knowledge of ecosystems and an understanding of how they interrelate as well as of the possible consequences of actions taken. With a clear understanding of the role they can play, coupled with the knowledge necessary for their successful participation, the community can be encouraged to take on this role.
- Furthermore, the community's ability to participate in environmental and natural resource conservation can be strengthened by training environmental leaders. A particularly important aspect of bringing about change in the way these resources are managed is the role that women and young people, especially in rural areas, can play.
- Community participation in the process of drafting and modifying laws and regulations can benefit the community and the government through greater transparency and accountability. Therefore, the community should be allowed and encouraged to participate in this process. A first step would be to make detailed information available so that the issues can be discussed in the public arena.
- Governments in the region must take positive steps to tackle the important issues of public disclosure, accountability, transparency, and good governance.
- In terms of regional policies and working together, governments in each country can assist civil society movements through the provision of an efficient networking infrastructure.
- From an academic viewpoint, there is a need to build new knowledge on how diverse communities can live and work together and how they can all be part of the decision-making process. There is a need to develop new ways of solving problems and move from the divisive yes/no, black/white approach to a more inclusive and consensual method of decision-making. The new approach would recognize cultural differences and aim for goals of social advancement, well being and equity, and environmental protection and sustainability, as well as economic development.

Conclusion

What is now emerging throughout the region is a growing movement of people who realize that they must take responsibility for the management and care of their local environments: their wetlands, rivers, forests, coastal areas, parks, resources, and urban environments. In addition, this group is showing that they are very keen to take on the task of protecting these areas, recognizing that it is in their own best interests to do so. More enlightened governments recognize the important contribution that civil society and local communities can make in these areas, and they are moving towards devolving decision-making to lower jurisdictions, and are actively supporting civil society groups.

There is now an urgent need for all governments in the region to make progress in empowering communities so that they are in a position to manage their local environments effectively. This includes providing an infrastructure to support civil society groups, protecting citizens rights, introducing environmental education to all schools and the community, promoting open and constructive discussions in the community and the media, considering the social and environmental consequences of

development projects, as well as the economic, providing free access to information, and devolving decision-making to the most appropriate level as outlined at the Rio Convention.

Local communities often have detailed knowledge of their local environments, and governments are now beginning to understand the tremendous environmental management potential that these people represent. Through government support in areas of empowerment and infrastructure, healthy environments can be maintained and economic development can continue in a more sustainable way.