

Transcending State Boundaries: Contesting Development, Social Suffering and Negotiation

A collection of papers from the international conference
'Critical Transitions in the Mekong Sub-region'

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti and Amporn Jirattikorn

Editors

Regional Center for
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(RCSD)



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Regional Center for
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Preface

When the idea of forming the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) was initially proposed, it was expected that the riparian countries in the region would be connected, and would collaborate with and compete amongst one another in search of economic growth and development. As was expected, the flow of commodities, people and information has since increased significantly, with regional integration attracting huge levels of investment from outside, the aim being to utilize the area's abundant natural resources and pool of cheap labor. As a result, many road construction and waterway projects in the Mekong region have been implemented, with natural resources extensively exploited and with many local people losing access to these same resources; their livelihoods changing drastically. The Mekong sub-region has thus entered another transition phase.

In January 2007, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) organized an international conference entitled 'Critical Transitions in the Mekong Region' in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. The aim of the conference was to critically explore and analyze transitions in the GMS from a social science perspective, focusing in particular on the areas of development, resource management, cross-border flows of people and commodities; ethnicity and changing livelihoods. It also explored empirical findings and debates arising from emerging issues such as the regionalization of development, regional modernity, agrarian transition, and trans-nationalism and emerging civil society, among others topic areas.

It took us some time to select the papers to be threaded together and published in book form, plus to contact the

authors in order for them to revise their work. This process was managed by Dr. Aranya Siriphon and Dr. Amporn Jirattikorn - our new RCSD faculty members, who deserve much credit for their patient efforts in turning some of the proceedings papers into two edited volumes, the first of which is entitled 'Spatial Politics and Economic Development in the Mekong Sub-region', and this, the second 'Transcending State Boundaries: Contesting Development, Social Suffering and Negotiation.'

In this second volume, six papers have been included, covering two themes: (i) 'Large Dam Projects and Social Suffering' and (ii) 'Spatial Arrangements, Borders and Negotiation.' The papers in this volume discuss the impacts that state-sponsored development programs have had on the livelihoods of local people. It is generally believed that development is essential for boosting economic prosperity and eradicating poverty at the national/regional level; however, at the micro-level, development projects, and especially dam construction projects, often lead to problems for local people and are the source of social suffering, suffering that they then have to find ways to cope with. As a response, both direct and indirect contestation and negotiation are often used by local people in order to regain and retain their rights and identities. It is hoped that what has occurred and what has been learned during this critical transition phase will be of use for policy makers and practitioners in the future, when re-thinking development in the sub-region.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their endeavors while working with us on this book project. Special thanks must go to Dr. Aranya Siriphon for her editorial work and her other contributions during the early stages of the project, to Dr. Amporn Jirattikorn for being the key editor of the book, and to the many others engaged on this project who

we do not have the space to mention here. We would also like to express our deepest gratitude to the Rockefeller Foundation for its generous support, support which has allowed us to learn together - across boundaries.

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Charles F. Keyes is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Washington, and has had a long affiliation with the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University - since 1965. At the University of Washington he has mentored forty Ph.D students, over one-third of them from Thailand and Vietnam. Since the early 1960s he has carried out extensive research primarily in Thailand, but also in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia on Buddhism and modernity, ethnicity and national cultures;

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David Selwyn Hall served as a research affiliate at the Mekong Sub-Region Social Research Centre, Faculty of Liberal Arts at Ubon Ratchathani University from 2009 to November 2010. He received an M. Litt. (Post-Graduate Research Degree in Sociology) from St Antony's College at the University of Oxford in 1986, with his thesis published by Macmillan in 1987. He is a social impacts assessment specialist with twenty years experience as a consultant, and is familiar with the Mekong region, as he has spent a number of years working on assignments with the Mekong River Commission and the Stockholm Environment Institute.

Hong Anh Vu is a Ph.D candidate in Anthropology at Syracuse University. Her dissertation research is based in Tra Vinh Province in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, and examines the impacts

of the expansion of commercial shrimp aquaculture on local livelihoods. Hong Anh Vu has long been engaged in development work, based on her previous employment with Oxfam Hong Kong in Vietnam, where she worked on issues associated with sustainable development in the Mekong River Basin and on landmine issues. She has also worked as a consultant on gender and urban development issues.

Kanokwan Manorom is currently an Assistant Professor in Sociology and a lecturer based at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University in Thailand. In 1998, she earned a Ph.D in Rural Sociology from the University of Missouri-Columbia in the USA, and since returning to Thailand, has spent most of her time working on issues revolving around dams, livelihoods, water poverty and water governance. A recent publication by Kanokwan is focused on the Pakmun Dam in Thailand and water-related poverty issues.

Mukdawan Sakboon is currently a researcher with a special interest in the issues of nationalism, citizenship, ethnicity and HIV/AIDS, and in 2009 received a Ph.D in Anthropology from Macquarie University, Sydney in Australia. A former journalist with one of Thailand's leading English-language newspapers, *The Nation*, Mukdawan has reported widely on the issue of healthcare, especially on the scourge of HIV/AIDS and the health impacts of free-trade agreements, as well as on the issue of human rights and ethnic minority groups, with an emphasis on the lack of citizenship rights among ethnic hill dwellers in northern Thailand.

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Introduction

Amporn Jirattikorn

This volume has its beginnings in a conference: 'Critical Transitions in the Mekong Region', which was held in Chiang Mai, Thailand in January 2007. This international conference explored the rapid changes taking place in the Mekong region from various perspectives; the sociological, political-economic, environmental and geographical. The conference employed the Mekong as a framework through which diverse populations, diverse ethnic and cultural identities and diverse research interests, plus their linkages, could be explored.

The Mekong River has been a key lifeline for people in continental Southeast Asia for many thousands of years. This majestic river and its tributaries forms a drainage basin of more than 300,000 square miles, covering areas of China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. In total, 300 million people live around its main course and within its wider river basin. Along its course, the Mekong and its tributaries are the life blood for its inhabitants; its fisheries, navigable stretches and irrigation water vital to the region's historically productive agriculture, something which has helped create many great civilizations over time. Its in turn beneficial and disastrous floods have helped to form a traditional pattern of life, one geared toward the annual cycle of high and low water (Weatherbee 1997). This traditional pattern of life; however, is not what local developers since the late nineteenth century have wanted to see. Beginning at that time, the Mekong region

began to be 'opened' by European explorers, who set the stage for the development of the wider region. European explorers, followed by the associated colonial regimes, as well as governments during the post-colonial period, saw the river as an agent of modernization and industrialization.

The collection of essays in this volume deal with social, economic and political developments in the Mekong region. As the aim of the conference was to enhance understanding of the rapid changes taking place in the Mekong Region in the context of development and poverty, the collection of essays in this volume is divided into two sections, first the various impacts of development projects and second, local responses to development schemes. The collection begins with an introductory chapter by Charles Keyes, whose article provides an overview of development in the Mekong region over the past century. Situated between two different world views, scientific knowledge and local knowledge, Keyes illustrates how, throughout the twentieth century and beyond, the ideology of development has been predicated on the premise that scientific knowledge can produce benefits for all those living in this region. Scientific pursuits implemented through activities such as cartography, forestry, irrigation and agronomy, have been undertaken not only by the colonial regimes, but also by the independent governments of the post-colonial period. Thus, the Mekong region has entered into an 'Age of Science' since that time.

Keyes's chapter provides an insight into how this development began and how scientific knowledge has its limits. In the early twenty-first century, it is clear that the implementation of projects and programs based on rigid scientism has actually divided and displaced peoples, increased inequality and created new types of social suffering. Keyes argues that in response to such government-backed and scientifically-

based development, it is essential that the local knowledge and practices drawn from local people's own traditions be recognized, and made the basis for people-centered development.

In arguing that local knowledge can still live on and co-exist alongside scientific knowledge, Keyes bases his analysis on the movie 'Mekong Full Moon Party' (2002), which describes the phenomenon of the Naga 'fireballs' - the mysterious emergence of hundreds of fireballs from the Mekong River each year on the full moon day of the eleventh lunar month, from different standpoints. Throughout the paper, we come to see how the Mekong region, during the age of science, is still an area torn between local knowledge, such as nagas, and modern, scientific knowledge, such as the need for irrigation water and hydro-electric power.

The movie attempts to portray both the negative and positive aspects of science, as people try to find ways to unlock nature. It is undeniable that the vast majority of people in the Mekong region have benefited to a significant degree from the proliferation of new technologies based on science, plus the implementation of development policies by the various nation states. At the same time, it is also clear that scientific knowledge has its limits and, more often than not, the implementation of projects and programs based purely on science has resulted in greater inequality, displacement and the creation of new types of suffering for people whose livelihoods depend directly on the pulse of the river. By the late twentieth century, 'scientifically' driven development in the Mekong region was beginning to be challenged by groups of local people drawing on their own traditions and local knowledge. The three papers collected here under the theme of the impacts of development, provide three interrelated case studies on the impacts of big dam projects on the lives of the Mekong River's inhabitants, and how people have

begun to challenge development projects to ensure that their voices are expressed and heard.

Large Dam Projects and Social Suffering

First, Bruce Missingham's article traces the beginnings of the local, community-based challenge to a state-sponsored project on the Pak Mun Dam. Construction of the Dam, on Thailand's main tributary of the Mekong River, began in 1991 and was completed in 1994. The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the state authority responsible for building and running the Dam, claimed that the dam would bring modernization and prosperity, jobs for local people and improved roads and other infrastructure, and would have minimal environmental and social impacts. While EGAT and state officials attempted to downplay the negative impacts of the Pak Mun Dam, its construction actually sparked social conflict and organized opposition as soon as it was announced to the local communities in 1989. Starting with a small anti-dam group, the Mun River Villagers Committee, the movement then grew into the 'Assembly of the Poor', the first ever nationwide grassroots social movement. The Assembly of the Poor not only drew upon issues associated with the environmental impacts of the Pak Mun Dam, but also the impacts of other development projects and industrial developments throughout the country, to seek wider involvement so that their voices and concerns could be heard.

Although facing a decline in its fortunes during the 2000s, the experience of the Assembly of the Poor still offers lessons. Being the first nationwide organization to represent the interests of the rural poor in Thailand, the Assembly deserve credit for contributing to the re-shaping of state-civil society relations in Thailand, and for inspiring the struggle to

develop grassroots democracy. The struggles by the poor, to defend their livelihoods and maintain access to local resources, are without doubt part of a critique of development in which local people lose their claims to land and other resources, something which has turned the poor into 'victims of development'.

While Missingham takes the issue of development at a somewhat macro level, paying attention to how local people have formed their own movements in response to the decline in natural resources caused by state-sponsored development projects, Nitinan Kanprom looks at the impact of development projects in a different way. Her paper examines the impacts on the lives of villagers living near the construction site for the Lam Ta Khong Pumped Storage Project in Nakhon Ratchasima Province, northeastern Thailand, focusing on the impacts it has had on their livelihood and health, and exploring the social suffering experienced by those affected.

In exploring the social suffering of people affected by this project, Nitinan argues that people in turn have employed their experiences of suffering to negotiate within their everyday lives, as well as to construct a counter-discourse as part of their social movement. Her paper uses "social suffering" as an interesting framework to look at the impact of development, something which generally results from the affects of political, economic and institutional power, and how these forms of power influence people's responses to social problems (Kleinman et al. 1997). Here, the collective suffering experienced by villagers living near the construction site has resulted from a decline in natural resources and the adverse health-related impacts of the construction activities. In exploring the social suffering of people who are "victims of development", Nitinan not only tells the stories of individuals whose lives and health have been affected by the project, but also reveals how shared

suffering can in turn be used as a resource to help form networks, alliances and counter-discourse strategies.

Hall and Kanokwan's paper weaves the two papers discussed above together nicely by bringing the issue of class into the analysis. The paper examines the responses and coping mechanisms used by poor families when faced with a decline in their natural resources, as triggered by dam developments. The combination of high levels of poverty and dependence upon natural resources has made poor families particularly vulnerable to short- and long-term changes in their resource base, and the paper looks in particular at how dams change family relations in poor households, as they struggle to adjust to the ecological changes triggered by changed river flows. However, as Hall and Kanokwan suggest, poor families should not be seen as passive victims of dam developments, as the paper shows how they deploy a wide range of coping mechanisms to recover from stresses and shocks. It illustrates how families confront food and income insecurity resulting from a decline in water and river resources created by development projects – by devising new livelihood activities and strategies.

The major contribution of this paper is not only to present the impacts of large dams on the livelihoods of those who are natural resource dependent, but also to discuss how new measures and policies can be developed to better predict the likely impacts of large dam projects, and to improve the prospects for vulnerable families living nearby .

Spatial Arrangements, Borders and Negotiation

While the three essays above address the impacts of state-sponsored development projects, the three papers in the next section look at the notion of development from a different

angle. While dams are the most visible manifestation of river management activities, and have had a large impact on the livelihoods of riverside inhabitants, the changes that have occurred in the Mekong region, under the name of development, have been far greater than just from state-sponsored projects. The more the region develops, the more people are drawn into the global capitalist economy. The three papers in this section question the notion of economic development, an activity that places its emphasis on the increased output of either industrial or agricultural goods, and that downplays human security issues and as a result, fails to generate the equality and security promised to local people.

Hong Anh Vu's 'Negotiating Gendered Resources in Agrarian Transitions' discusses the rapid shift to shrimp aquaculture in Vietnam's Mekong Delta since the early 1990s. This shift has resulted in dramatic changes in the use of natural resources which, in turn, has had fundamental impacts on the gendered division of labor. Vu argues that before shrimp farming became the dominant occupation in many areas in the Delta, women were actively engaged in all aspects of agricultural production. However, shrimp aquaculture is treated almost exclusively as a male domain, excluding women from the resources they once had access to. The level of exclusion of women has varied according to the model or models of shrimp farming adopted in each region, and this also defines the level of risk and vulnerability that farming households experience. The more intense the aquacultural model adopted, the more important it becomes for women to be kept away, as women are associated with bad luck, disease and ultimately, crop failures.

In assessing the gender implications of shrimp aquaculture, as a capital intensive, high-risk activity, Vu's paper seeks to understand the premise on which notions of gendered

space have been created, developed, shared and sustained. The paper offers insights into how women have coped with their increasingly marginalized position, and asserted themselves in order to sustain the well-being of their families, as shrimp aquaculture shifts local resources away from more traditional modes of farming.

Water does flow downhill, but some of the key social, economic and political developments in the so-called Mekong 'region' here, maybe best understood by taking a transnational rather than national approach. In 'Contracts without Borders', David Burch and Roy Rickson tackle the notion of the nation-state in an era which David Harvey has described as one of "flexible accumulation", whereby corporations have become much more internationally mobile. Over the past two decades we have seen the core capitalist countries and areas (such as the US, Western Europe and Japan), begin to take advantage of the cheaper labor, looser regulations and hence cheaper production costs available in the third world, by shifting their manufacturing base there, Burch and Rickson discuss recent developments in the Mekong Region in terms of the emergence of cross-border contracts. What is new here has been the establishment of formal contractual relations across borders, through which agribusinesses in one country (in this case, Thailand) contract with growers in another country for the supply of commodities. Thai agribusinesses in this case source the supply of the raw materials they require, by entering into formal agreements across national boundaries.

For certain, the development of contracts across borders is the result of the increased mobility of capital and labor during the late capitalist period, but what makes this case particularly interesting is that, instead of territorial competition developing among government units for new investment opportunities, here the governments of the Mekong region

countries have developed a number of mechanisms to integrate economic activities.

The Ayeyawady - Chao Phraya - Mekong Economic Co-operation Strategy (ACMECS), which was established in 2003, involves five regional partner countries: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, who collaborate in order to increase investment in agricultural production. One of the priority areas involves contract farming, and government officials have identified some fifteen crops in which private investors in the region are willing to invest, in order to produce agricultural raw materials for processing. In one instance, the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group in Thailand has developed a number of corn cultivation projects with farmers in Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia, in order to produce the appropriate inputs for CP's animal feed plants in Thailand. Governments in the region have long considered contract farming as a way of alleviating rural poverty, and for this reason it has been a key component of development policy in rural areas. Burch and Rickson take a close look at the effectiveness of those poverty-alleviation strategies based on contract farming, and evaluate the ACMECS programs from this perspective.

In the last paper, Mukdawan Sakboon's 'The Borders Within', draws the issue of ethnicity into the notion of development. In Thailand, as in other countries in Asia, ethnic minority highland peoples are often seen as the counter to modernity. Their cultural differences often make them 'under-privileged', and 'backward' in the eyes of the authorities and the public in general. This notion of backwardness, tradition and forest destruction among the hill people has often resulted in governments attempting to turn them into citizens by 'modernizing' them. Since the 1960s, the Thai State has made attempts on several levels to assimilate highland peoples into Thai society,

setting up Thai schools, introducing development projects and encouraging the growing of cash crops to replace poppy cultivation in highland settlements.

Mukdawan looks at the issues facing highland peoples in terms of two spheres: development and citizenship. Focusing on the Akha people, her paper traces the history of state-ethnic relationships in order to understand how national integration projects have grouped the issues of territory and citizenship together. As is often the case that states exercise their power through officials and state agents, this paper investigates the citizenship registration process in a local Thai district. Exploiting villagers' desire to belong, district officials have colluded with sub-district and village heads in order to extract both money and loyalty from the villagers, and citizenship has become an instrument used by these officials to extract social, economic, political and cultural cooperation from them. As Mukdawan concludes, Thai state officials still hold the notion that the cultural difference between the hill peoples and the Thais is the key reason for all the problems related to security, narcotics and forest destruction. With the issue of national belonging being used as a powerful driver behind the surveillance and control of upland villagers, this has created internal barriers that have excluded the upland minorities from participating meaningfully in the national realm.

Taken together, this book provides an empirically rich piece of work which will improve our understanding of the Mekong region, as viewed from both a national and transnational perspective.

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'Development' of the Mekong Region: Local Knowledge Confronts Science

Charles Keyes

The Local vs. the Global

I want to base my reflections on 'development' in the Mekong region by talking about an award winning Thai film, entitled 'Mekong Full Moon Party'. This is, to my knowledge, the only feature length movie in which the Mekong River is center stage. Although this film was made by a Thai producer, it is not a film that promotes a Thai perspective; it is truly a transnational film as it moves from the Thai to the Lao shore of the river and many of the characters speak Lao rather than Thai.



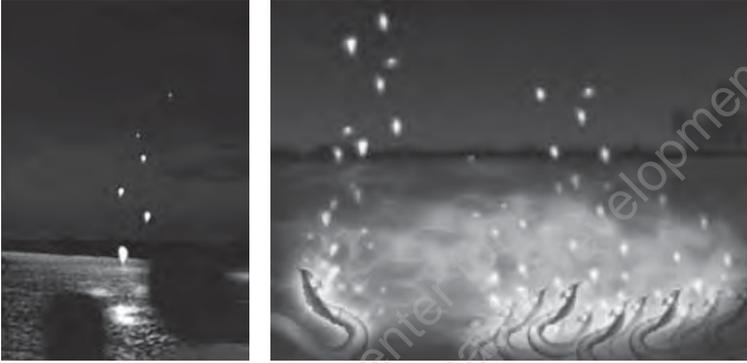
The film¹, released in 2002 and directed by Jira Maligool, focuses on a confrontation between science and local culture that takes place on the Mekong River near Nong Khai in northeastern Thailand, as representatives of each seek to explain the mysterious emergence of dozens, even hundreds of fireballs from the river each year at the end of the rainy season – thus, the Thai title of the film, referring to the fifteenth or full moon day of the eleventh lunar month.

The central characters in the film are a young man, Kan, played by Anuchit Sapanpong, and his foster father, played by the famous comic actor, Noppadol Duangporn, who is Luang Phô Lô, the Abbot of a Buddhist temple-monastery on the Lao side of the river. Kan was successful in school and as a swimmer, and has since gone to Bangkok where he is studying at a university. He returns to Nong Khai just before the fireballs are expected to rise from the river.

His home town has been transformed into a carnival, as people gather to see this phenomenon. The film opens with scenes of raucous merriment as urban Thai and Western tourists move among vendors of food and drink and stand in front of stages with musicians and dancing girls. Although the event has occurred each year for as long as anyone can remember, it is only in recent years that it has become a tourist attraction, and local officials and merchants have responded by promoting interest in it.

1 Images used in this paper are taken from web sites concerning the film. See <http://www.thailand-travelonline.com/thailand-destinations/northeast-thailand-isaan/nong-khai-naga-fireballs-the-mysterious-phenomenon-on-mekong-river/1447/>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mekhong_Full_Moon_Party and http://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/15_ค่ำ_เดือน_11.

Local lore credits Phayā Nāk or Nāga, the supernatural embodiment of the River, with creating the fireballs to signal the end of the rainy season, which also coincides with Buddhist lent.



Those enlightened with a scientific education; however, believe that there must be a rational and natural explanation for the phenomenon. Two characters in the film serve as the spokesmen for a scientific explanation. One is Dr. Norati (Boonchai Limathibul), a local man who has returned to practice medicine in his home community. Dr. Norati's bungling experiments; however, fail to impress other local people, not even his fiancée. A more convincing scientific explanation is offered by a Bangkok science professor, Dr. Surapol (also played by another well known actor, Somlek Sakdikul). This assertion of scientific authority is; however, confounded by the failure of even Dr. Surapol to provide an adequate explanation of the fireballs.

The central part of the film centers on what appears to be the real explanation of the phenomenon as a hoax, as perpetrated by the monks and novices of Luang Phô Lô's monastery on the Lao side of the Mekong. The Abbot attempts to recruit

Kan, to help plant the small explosive devices manufactured in his temple in the mud of the river bottom. Kan is torn between his love for his foster father and his sense, honed by his education in Bangkok, that such a fraud is not acceptable in the modern world. He finally turns the Abbot down and returns to the Thai side of the river.

The climax of the story is Kan's re-discovery of the deep truth of local culture. I will; however, delay discussing this until the end. Here I only want to use the story as an illustration of how in recent years the reshaping of the world in the countries through which the Mekong flows, and that began with what I will refer to as the "age of science", has been challenged through the re-assertion of knowledge grounded in local experience. As Lowe (2006) demonstrates in her book about the competing interpretations offered by scientists and local people of northern Sulawesi, and as Prasert Trakansuphakon (2007) shows for the Karen in northern Thailand, who have developed a fusion of scientific and traditional knowledge in their efforts to act as guardians of the forest, such challenges are becoming more compelling.

The Mekong in the Age of Science

The modern scientific challenge to the local in the Mekong region can be said to have begun in the second decade of the nineteenth century in the forests of Burma (see Bryant 1997). In the late eighteenth century, the British discovered that in parts of India and especially Southeast Asia, there were large stands of teak forest. Teak is ideal for ship-building because it does not decay rapidly when soaked and is impervious to insects. As Britain expanded its commercial as well as military fleet, teak became almost as important as oil would become in the twentieth century. As the teak and other hardwood forests

of India began to deplete, the British looked to Southeast Asia for new sources of this important commodity.

The nearest major source was in lower and western Burma, where there were dense teak forests. Although local people had made some use of teak and other tropical hardwoods for building houses, Buddhist temples and other buildings, they did not attempt to cut many of the large old-growth teak trees. Indeed, the forests in which these trees stood were considered to be wild dangerous terrains, filled with spirits as well as fierce animals. The British, in contrast, considered such forests as *natural* reserves that could be exploited for commercial and security purposes. Again, the comparison with oil is striking. In both cases, the natural world was and still is viewed by those with superior power as a repository of resources that scientific inquiry demonstrates can be exploited for 'development', that is, the expansion of a global capitalist economy.

What began in Burma as British expansion primarily for economic reasons gave way to a full-scale colonial project. By the late nineteenth century, not only had the British conquered the whole of Burma, but the French also undertook their own 'civilizing mission' in Asia, with the conquest of the territories that today are the states of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The 'civilizing missions' of both the French and the British (although the term is usually associated only with the French, it is equally applicable to the British) were predicated on the assumption that Europeans possessed superior knowledge derived from science. The essence of science is knowledge acquired through disciplined and systematic inquiries about the 'natural' aspects of the world. By the late nineteenth century science had made possible the development in Europe of many new technologies, many of which became powerful instruments that facilitated European colonial domination.

The Mekong River itself became the object of scientific inquiry in the late nineteenth century when a French exploration mission led by Doudart de Lagrée made its way from Saigon up the river to Laos (Garnier, Doudart de Lagrée, Delaporte, Joubert and Thorel 1873; also see Garnier 1996). As Osborne (2000) has shown, this mission can be said to have laid the foundation for the scientific development of the Mekong, but such development has from the beginning been shaped by politics.

Although there were some investments made by the French colonial and the Thai governments in the first half of the twentieth century in projects that made use of the waters of the Mekong or its tributaries, Mekong-centered development truly began in the post-World War II period. In 1957, after Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam (or, at the time, two Vietnams) had gained independence from France, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (today the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) prepared a report (United Nations. Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East 1957) that envisaged harnessing the Mekong and its tributaries for hydro-electric power and irrigation purposes. Although in the first decades after this report, war and political upheaval precluded implementation of many of the recommendations, the Thai Government did undertake a series of major dam projects on tributaries of the Mekong, from the mid 1960s through the 1980s.

By the mid 1990s, conditions in the other Southeast Asian riparian countries, namely Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, had become sufficiently stable for representatives of these countries to sponsor the creation of the Mekong Commission, to coordinate scientific research and development of the waters of the Mekong and its tributaries. By this time,

China had also begun its own development projects on the upper Mekong.

From the 1960s on, when dams were constructed on the Chi River, a major northeastern Thai tributary of the Mekong, it was clear that the concerns and knowledge of local people living in the catchment area of the dams were being wholly ignored by Thai policy makers and those implementing the projects (Ingersoll 1969 n.d., Kardell 1970).

All states in the Mekong region asserted ultimate control over the 'natural resources' within the territories under their control and arrogated to their governments the right to manage these resources in a scientific way. This led to a profound transformation in the way in which the peoples of the region relate to land, forests and water. Scientific studies of soils, waterways, and forests were employed by governments to bring all territories within state borders under state control (see Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). These resources were not only 'liberated' – as Karl Polanyi (1957) once said – from the nexus of kinship, but they were also removed from the jurisdiction of local spirits and deities.

The 'development' states that succeeded the colonial states in Southeast Asia reached their zenith of authority in the second half of the twentieth century. These states have devoted significant wealth to ensuring that officials are trained in modern scientific methods of resource management, and even more to transforming the landscape by carrying out cadastral surveys to determine property ownership, constructing dams and irrigation systems, and designating some forests as national reserves or parks.

The vast majority of peoples of the Mekong region have clearly benefited to a significant degree by the proliferation of new technologies based on science and the implementation

of the development policies of the states under whose authority they live. At the same time, by the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century it is also clear that scientific knowledge has its limits, and that implementation of projects and programs based on rigid scientism has divided and displaced peoples, increased inequalities and generated new types of social suffering.

Since the late twentieth century, the 'scientifically' driven development of the Mekong region has begun to be challenged by groups of local people who have drawn on their own traditions and have found support from some non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Reassertion of the Local

The most prolonged and significant local challenge to state-sponsored projects designed to harness the Mekong and its tributaries for 'development' centered on the Pak Mun (Moon) dam, at the confluence of the Mun and Mekong Rivers in the southeastern corner of northeastern Thailand. The Pak Mun dam was originally proposed in the late 1960s, but was not placed high on the Government's list of hydro-electric projects until two decades later.

In 1985, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) placed the Pak Mun project high on the agenda of its proposed projects, and although by this time democratically elected governments had assumed much of the power of the State, once controlled by the military, most leaders of the political parties were as strongly committed to promoting 'development', predicated on industrialization, as the military leaders had been. Rural people were seen primarily as a source of labor for new industries rather than as people whose ways

of life should be maintained and fostered. However, by the late 1980s rural people in northeastern Thailand had become considerably less compliant and more sophisticated than in the past. They found they could now turn to some of the numerous NGOs as well to some academics, certain newspapers, and even a few elected representatives, for support with their concerns.

The decision in 1989 by the then government of General Chatichai Choonhawan to approve the building of the Pak Mun dam generated significant protests that would continue for nearly two decades. In 1991, the World Bank granted a loan to the Thai Government to build the dam after the Bank concluded that adequate attention had been given to the environmental impacts of the project – a position strongly contested by those who protested the dam being built. Despite large-scale protests by local villagers, NGOs, many academics, several newspapers and international environmentalist groups, construction began on the dam in 1991 with the destruction of the Kaeng Ta Na rapids.

The conflict also entailed the evocation of local spirits. On May 23rd 1991 EGAT removed a shrine to a river spirit known by the name of Chao Por Pak Dome (*Cao Phô Pāk Dom*), that is, the ‘Lord of the Mouth of the Dom River’ from the construction site. Dr. Nattawut Udaysen, the water resources engineer in charge of the project, claimed that EGAT had purchased from villagers the land on which the shrine stood and had invited nine monks and a specialist in Brahmanical rituals to perform the necessary rituals. It is interesting to note that none of the Thai workers for EGAT were willing to remove the shrine. EGAT “officials did not dare to do the deed, and a Western expert acting as an engineering consultant for EGAT on the Pak Mool project eventually drove the tractor himself. A series of mishaps that followed

the act have fuelled superstitions about the danger of challenging the power of these spirits” (Usher 1991). Despite all the efforts to be sensitive to local customs, many villagers were outraged by the act. Hundreds congregated at the site despite warnings that they were acting in violation of martial law that was still in force in the districts in question (*The Nation*, May 26 1991).

Construction of the dam was completed in 1995. Because protests continued throughout the construction phase, the Government agreed to compensate those whose land had been inundated and those whose livelihoods as fishermen had been seriously eroded, as fish were unable to swim upstream from the Mekong. However, this compensation was never deemed adequate by the displaced villagers involved, especially as it became apparent after the dam was built that the fish ladders associated with the dam were an almost total failure.

The economic crisis that began in Thailand in 1997 made the situation for those impacted by the dam even more dire, as many who had found employment in urban areas returned to the rural communities from which they had come. Worse yet, the Chuan Leekpai government that assumed office in the wake of this crisis reneged on a new compensation package for the displaced villagers that been approved by the preceding government of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh.

On March 23rd 1999, more than 3000 rural people occupied the land next to the dam.² They founded a settlement they named Ban Mae Mun Man Yun, the ‘village of the sustainable Mun River’.³ These villagers, affiliated with the Assembly of the

2 For a chronology of events relating to the Pak Mun controversy, see Sharma and Imhof (1999) and Atiya Achakulwisut (2000).

3 The name has been variously translated as ‘Sustainable Mun River Village’ and ‘Longevity of the Moon River Village’.

Poor (samatcha khoncon), a loosely organized coalition between rural people and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to protest the Pak Mun dam and other government-sponsored development projects⁴, protesting against the maintenance of a hydro-electric dam that had caused them and their kinsmen serious economic hardships. In May 2000, members of the settlement actually took over the dam. This action did not lead, as many thought it would, to the Government moving in with force to evict the occupiers. In contrast, it ushered in a prolonged public debate about the cost-benefits of projects such as the Pak Mun dam.

The immediate impetus for the occupation of the site near the dam, was the announcement a few days previously that the World Commission on Dams would undertake an “independent study of Thailand's Pak Mun Dam and related aspects of the Mekong/Mun river basin.”⁵ The World Commission on Dams had been set up in 1997 with support by both the World Bank and The World Conservation Union (IUCN) to “review the development effectiveness of dams and assess alternatives for water resources and energy development,

4 A publication I purchased from representatives of the Assembly of the Poor at Pak Mun lists sixteen serious cases negatively affecting villagers in northeastern Thailand that the Government was called on to address. These included five dams already built, three in the process of being built, five cases relating to forest reserves or national parks, and three cases relating to the use of common lands. Thirteen of the cases concerned Ubon Ratchathani province (six in Khong Chiam District, the same district as that in which Pak Mun is located). Of the others, two were in Chayaphum Province and two were in Sisaket Province (Fai Wichakan Samatcha Khoncon [Technical Unit, Assembly of the Poor] 2000.). The Assembly of the Poor does not champion the causes only of rural people in northeastern Thailand, but has also played a role in cases involving rural peoples in other areas as well. On the AOP, see Baker (2000).

5 WCD Press Release, March 20 1999; http://www.dams.org/studies/th/th_background.htm.

and to develop internationally-acceptable criteria and guidelines to advise future decision-making in the planning, design, construction, monitoring, operation, and decommissioning of dams.”⁶ The WCD study of Pak Mun was prompted by the fact that although the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department had concluded the previous year that the dam had been a success, that fish populations had not declined in the Mun river, and that the resettlement and compensation program for those affected by the dam had been “exceedingly generous” and in “a class of its own”, many local villagers and their NGO supporters continued to maintain that quite the opposite was true.

Although the protestors initially demanded increased compensation for the loss of the fishermen's land and livelihoods, after the occupation of the dam they shifted their demands, saying that the dam should be decommissioned. Only by opening the sluices would the varieties of fish that were once plentiful in the Mun River, but had seriously declined since the dam had been built, return. Some also wanted to see a restoration of the ecology to how it was before the dam was built. EGAT countered that the dam generated a significant amount of electricity - far more than the WCD draft report indicated, and that, if this were eliminated, it would require an increase in electricity generation from plants using oil. It also claimed that the fish ladders that had been built with the dam, themselves a result of previous protests, were adequate or could be modified to ensure an adequate flow of fish. Finally, they claimed that compensation had already been more than generous.

⁶ This is taken from the history of the WCD on their web site: <http://www.dams.org/about/history.htm>.

⁷ The quotations are taken from Atiya Achakulwisut (2000) that refers the WBOED report, *Recent Experience with Involuntary Resettlement*.

In July 2000, following the recommendations of a panel set up by the Government to mediate the dispute between the protestors and EGAT, the sluice gates were opened for a temporary period of time (Bangkok Post, June 22 2000; Bangkok Post, July 7 2000). Because the protestors realized they had won only a tactical victory, most of them left the protest village at Pak Mun to go to Bangkok, where they joined other Assembly of the Poor protestors at a makeshift settlement near Government House (Bangkok Post, July 12 2000). Here, they sought to keep up the pressure on the Government.

In November 2000, the WCD report was released and, as anticipated, proved highly critical of EGAT and the World Bank. It found that that the dam had caused serious problems for people depending for fishing and agriculture on the Mun River. In anticipation of the release of the WCD report, the World Bank prepared a critique that rejected the WCD's findings; EGAT also rejected the findings. On November 21 2000 'gangsters' attacked remnants of Ban Mun Man Yuen and burned its houses (Bangkok Post, November 20 2000). EGAT initially admitted responsibility for the attack, and then denied it (Bangkok Post, November 21, 2000; The Nation, November 23 2000). Over the ensuing two months, the protest was eclipsed by campaigns to elect a new parliament in January 2001. The opposition Thai Rak Thai ('Thai Loves Thai') Party of Thaksin Shinawatra gained an overwhelming majority of seats in northeastern Thailand, including all seats in Ubon Province. The very strong support given by northeastern villagers to Thaksin's party seems to indicate that they believed that Thaksin would be more sensitive to the problems of the northeast than Chuan Leekpai, the previous prime minister.

The Thaksin government did intervene to try to resolve the conflict, and after some study, reached an agreement with the Assembly of the Poor that the sluice gates of the dam would be opened for four months during the rainy season from June to October. Although EGAT resisted this agreement and some local villagers supported EGAT, the agency was compelled to comply with Thaksin's order to open the sluices. Meanwhile, two studies, one by Ubon Ratchathani University and the other by the National Economic and Social Development Board, were undertaken to determine the relative costs and benefits of keeping the dam fully operative as EGAT advocated, shutting it down completely as some critics argued should be done, or allowing the sluices to be open for part of the year, as the compromise called for (Bangkok Post, June 21, 2001). The sluices were then opened for several months each year. However, in 2007, they were closed 'permanently', but the challenge was not forgotten.

As Chris Baker (2000: 8) has written regarding the Assembly of the Poor with which the Pak Mun protestors were affiliated, "The Assembly of the Poor is at heart a classic peasant struggle over rights to resources of land, water, and forests." In other words, the conflict over Pak Mun might be interpreted as one involving anti-development 'peasants' against a pro-development state. But as Baker (loc. cit.) goes on to say, the Assembly of the Poor "differs radically from peasant movements of earlier eras. Peasants are not what they were."

I have given an extended account of the confrontation over Pak Mun because it was in a real sense, the 'prior text' (Becker 1979) for the audiences who viewed "Mekong Full Moon". The story of the Pak Mun controversy had been in the press, and in the public eye, for nearly two decades when the film was released. The film's popularity, I think, reflects the

ambivalence many in Thailand had come to have regarding the supremacy of 'scientific'-based development over local knowledge.

Conclusion

In concluding, I return to the film 'Mekong Full Moon'. Kan, who is the main character in the film, can be seen as the paradigmatic person whose identity is shaped both by his local origins and by his modern scientific education in a cosmopolitan urban world. Kan left Nong Khai and gained admittance to a prestigious university in part because of his locally-learned skills as a swimmer and, in part, because he was encouraged to become better educated by his foster father, the old Buddhist abbot of a temple in Laos.

After having lived in Bangkok for several years, he returns on a visit to Nong Khai at the end of the rainy season, when the fireballs are expected to shoot up from the Mekong. He is recruited by the Lao abbot who is his foster father to help once again in perpetuating what he now believes to be a fraud – the planting of chemical-soaked balls on the bottom of the Mekong which after being in the water for a period will explode and send up the fireballs which are famous throughout the country. He is deeply torn between his love for his foster father and his educated disdain for such a sham. In the end, he refuses to help. The old monk then goes himself to plant the balls and in doing so drowns in the river.

Kan not only grieves for his foster father, but also expects that he and the Abbot's fellow monks will be radically discredited when it is discovered that the fireballs had been planted by humans. He is about to turn away from the River when the few fireballs he thought had been set by the monk

have finished. Suddenly, however, hundreds of balls began to shoot up.

The film concludes with Kan realizing that there may be more truth to the local wisdom embodied by his foster father than his now-educated mind could have accepted. Kan will never return to being only a local person; but he also knows that he can never cease also to be a person rooted in a particular locality.

The film makes audiences aware that local knowledge has not yet been suppressed by those who assert the supremacy of science, and that the Mekong still remains a place of Nagas as well as of water for irrigation and hydro-electric power.

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Regional Center for
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(RCSD)

*Part One:
Large Dam Projects and Social Suffering*

Regional Center for
Social Science and Sustainable Development
(RCSD)

1

The Pak Mun Dam: Social Conflict and Community Organising

Bruce Missingham

This chapter presents a brief history of social conflict and community organizing in response to the development of the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand. Recently, Foran and Manoram (2009: 74) have argued that social conflict over the Pak Mun Dam has “contributed to the reshaping of state-society relations in Thailand”, opening up new spaces for participation and deliberative politics. If that is the case, then mobilization, organizing and activism within civil society has been responsible for creating new opportunities for participation, and ensured that local people’s voices have been expressed in the public sphere, in the mass media and listened to in government offices. Therefore, in this chapter I focus on community organizing, collective action and networking in response to the development of the dam. I outline the beginnings of local, community-based opposition, the multifaceted and multi-leveled protest strategies of the anti-dam community organization and its NGO allies, the role of Mun River villagers and activists in the formation and activities of the Assembly of the Poor, and some influential international events such as the World Commission on Dams’ case study of the Pak Mun, and an international anti-dam conference on the Mun River at Rasi Salai Dam. I discuss some of the issues faced by the Assembly of the Poor over the last decade and the decline in its ability to achieve its campaign goals. Finally, in relation to the decline of the Assembly, I return to some

local level innovative strategies being pursued by Mun River villagers in their continuing struggles over the dam.¹

The Pak Mun Dam and Local Community Organizing up to 1995²

The Pak Mun Dam was constructed on the main tributary of the Mekong River within Thailand; the Chi-Mun River system which drains 75 percent of northeast Thailand. The dam is located near Hua Haew village about four kilometers upstream from the Mun River's confluence with the Mekong River. Pak Mun is a run-of-the-river hydropower dam; construction began in January 1991 and the dam was commissioned in June 1994.

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), the state authority responsible for building and running the Pak Mun Dam, claimed that the run-of-the-river construction would have minimal environmental and social impacts, as it would only raise the river levels to just above the normal wet season flood levels (EGAT 1984). EGAT's (1984) Environmental Impact Assessment Report asserted that only some 278 households would need to be relocated and compensated, and that the dam would improve fisheries production in the lower Mun River. Before

1 Most of the following account is based on field work and field visits to Mun River communities, Bangkok and other places, as well as interviews with members of the Assembly of the Poor, since 1996. For a summary timeline of events related to the Pak Mun Dam, see Foran (2006) and Foran and Kanaokwan (2009).

2 This section is based on Missingham 2003, Chapter 4. For detailed accounts of events during the 1990s see also Hubbel 1992, Nalinee et al. 2002, and Buchidta 1997.

construction; however, no studies on the local fish ecology or fishing economy were undertaken for the lower Mun River.

Despite EGAT and other state officials' consistent attempts to downplay the impacts of the Pak Mun Dam and suppress local dissent, the dam sparked social conflict and organized opposition as soon as it was announced among local communities in 1989 (Missingham 2003). EGAT proclaimed that the dam would bring modernization and prosperity; jobs for local people and improved roads and other infrastructure, and that very few people would be displaced. Local government officials such as District heads, Tambon heads and village heads were instructed to use their authority to promote local support and prohibit expressions of opposition. In many villages the dam quickly divided the community between pro-dam villagers who accepted the announcements of local government officials, and anti-dam villagers. Many also feared to speak out against the authorities.

A network of local people living in villages along the lower Mun River gradually coalesced, and in 1991 they established the 'Love the Mun River Group', a community-based organization formed to mobilize local opposition, better organize their campaign, and represent their voices to the Government. The villagers' organization changed its name to the 'Villagers Committee for Rehabilitation of Life and Community in the Mun River Basin' (hereafter, the 'Mun River Villagers Committee') in 1992. Student activists and NGOs such as the Union for Civil Liberties, Project for Ecological Recover and NGO-COD, allied with the group, and helped them to organize, build networks and plan their activities, campaigns and protests. By 1991 their numbers were still relatively small, numbering in the hundreds. At first, the anti-dam group campaigned and petitioned to stop the dam being constructed, but the goals of the organized anti-dam group

shifted as the dam project progressed. The construction process galvanized growing numbers of villagers to join the activities and protest rallies of the group. One turning point in the attitudes of local people came in April 1992, when EGAT commenced the blasting of rapids downstream of the dam wall, within Kaeng Tana National Park. The explosions were heard many kilometers away and local fishers became concerned about the effects of the blasting on fish populations and fish migration in the river. By the end of 1994, about 2500 families from 53 villages along the lower Mun River had joined the Mun River Villagers Committee.

The conflict over Pak Mun was enacted at a number of levels, from the local to the international, and involved a number of different social actors, from local villagers to the World Bank. But local people and their community organization constituted the social foundation of the anti-dam campaign, both numerically in terms of their membership, and also in terms of their ideologically constructed legitimacy to speak about the social and environmental effects of the dam. The Villagers' Committee submitted letters and petitions to EGAT and the Government, dispatched delegations to meet and lobby MPs, state officials, and the World Bank; organized demonstrations and protest marches at the dam and at provincial government offices and in Bangkok; sought publicity in the mass media and mounted direct actions such as blockading entry to the dam operations control room.

A decisive moment in the history of social conflict and community organizing against the Pak Mun Dam came in the Mun River Villager's Committee's long march and protest at the dam wall in 1994 and 1995. During the construction period, the Villagers' Committee had shifted their goal from stopping the dam to achieving appropriate compensation for the dam's destructive effects on local subsistence fishing

livelihoods. In October 2004, approximately 1000 of their members assembled at the Provincial Government's offices in the city of Ubon Ratchathani demanding 35,000 baht compensation for each year of the three year construction period. After two weeks, having not received a satisfactory response from the Government, the villagers started a march from Ubon city to the dam, about 100 kilometers away. The procession took fourteen days to reach the dam, and the Village Committee presented their case at villages along the way and slept in village temples at night. As they walked their numbers grew. Many local people talked about this being the time when they "woke up" to the effects of the dam and their individual ability to do something about it. When the procession arrived at the dam wall their numbers had grown to several thousand - according to the Villagers' Committee, 2230 families. The protestors occupied the dam wall and the road leading up to it and announced their determination to stay put until the Government responded to their petition. After four months, and several rounds of negotiation, the Government capitulated, and agreed to pay 90,000 baht compensation to each family whose fishing livelihood had been destroyed during the dam construction. Of that amount, each family would receive 30,000 baht in cash, and 60,000 baht would be paid into a new Pak Mun Cooperative which would be established to rehabilitate the livelihoods of its members.

This was a very significant point in the history of the Mun River Villagers' Committee, and indeed in grassroots organizing in Thailand. The rally's success reignited villagers' and activists' confidence in the power of organization and collective protest to gain material benefits for members. The protest at the dam wall had been very well organized and much had been learned about how to mobilize, organize and sustain a long protest rally. The compensation payment from the Government saw the establishment a few years later of the

Pak Mun Cooperative, which has continued to be a center of organizing and activism against the dam (see below). Finally, the rally's success, and the local organizational capabilities and national and international networks developed to support it, was a key antecedent to the formation of the Assembly of the Poor later the same year.

Pak Mun Dam and the Assembly of the Poor

The history of social conflict over the Pak Mun dam is closely bound up with the history of the Assembly of the Poor (AoP). The NGO activists and leaders of the Mun River Villagers Committee took leading roles in establishing the Assembly in December 1995, and their protest and campaign strategies have had a strong influence on Assembly activities since then. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Mun River group and the Assembly of the Poor has changed over the past fourteen years and has not been without its tensions. By 2007, the Assembly of the Poor was more like a loose network of community organisations and NGOs than a unified and cohesive social movement like it was in the 1990s. As its member groups and relationships between them changed, the relationship of the Mun River Group with the broader Assembly changed also.

On 10th December 1995, 250 villagers and NGO delegates gathered at Thammasat University in Bangkok for a conference entitled "The Assembly of the Poor: The consequences of large scale development projects", to which the Mun River Villagers' Committee sent a delegation. Other villagers' organisations represented included the Assembly of Small-scale Farmers of the Northeast (ASFN), the Northern Farmers' Network, the Network of People Affected by Dams, the Isan Farmers' Assembly, and a network of urban slum dwellers.

NGOs represented included the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD), Friends of the People, the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS), PER, the Student Federation of Thailand, the Thai Development Support Committee and the Wildlife Fund Thailand (Bantorn 1997). The conference travelled to Khong Jiam, a small town near the Pak Mun Dam, where the Mun River Villagers' Committee and a group of villagers from the nearby Sirinthorn Dam acted as the symbolic hosts of the conference.

The conference "agreed to form a loosely structured network called the '[Assembly] of the Poor' focussing on their problems and seeking solutions" (Bantorn 1997). NGO activists and villager leaders prepared the 'Mun River Declaration', a manifesto announcing the formation of the Assembly and presenting an ideological critique of industrial development. The Mun River Declaration proclaimed that the Assembly of the Poor would be a "platform (*wethi*) for mutual learning and exchange of knowledge about our problems by poor and disadvantaged people in society". The Assembly aimed to "to build the power and cooperation of the poor at the local, national and international levels to convince the public that states must manage resources in ways that ensure equity and fairness for all people, free rights, and popular participation and self-determination". The Assembly of the Poor was born and the Mun River was its birthplace (Missingham 2003).

The Assembly of the Poor employed the mobilisation, peaceful protest and direct action strategies that had been so effective for the Mun River Villagers' Committee, and other grassroots members like the Isan Farmers Assembly and ASFN. When the Assembly publicly announced its formation and released the Mun River Declaration in December 1995, it also submitted a carefully prepared, written petition to the Government detailing 47 specific demands all related to the

specific grievances of its grassroots members. The Mun River Villagers' Committee now sought further compensation for fisheries' destruction during the operation of the Pak Mun Dam. On 31st March 1996, the Assembly commenced a mass protest rally in the streets outside Government House in Bangkok, calling on the Government to respond to its petition. Twelve thousand people joined this first mass protest rally, which lasted for five weeks and won extensive media coverage nationally and internationally, as well as public recognition for the Assembly. The rally concluded on 23rd April after the Government of Prime Minister Banharn promised action on all grievances raised in the Assembly's petition. TV Channel 9 broadcast live the Assembly's final meeting with the Prime Minister before the rally dispersed. But when national elections in November 1996 returned a new coalition government led by the New Aspiration party and Chavalit Yongchaiyut, the Assembly found that the new government was reluctant to implement the previous Banharn government's promises. On 25th January 1997, the Assembly returned to Bangkok for their second mass protest rally, resolving not to move until they saw "tangible" efforts by the Government to respond to their petition. The Assembly's network had grown and NGO activists now compiled a petition containing 122 separate grievances and demands for reforms in Government policies. This rally lasted for 99 days and at its peak an estimated 30,000 people participated.

The Assembly of the Poor's 1997 protest was an extraordinary event in the history of collective political action by the rural and urban poor in Thailand. The demonstration represented one of the most sustained and well-organized mass protests ever mounted in Bangkok. It won considerable coverage and support in the mass media, which was clearly a crucial mediator in the conflict, generally according legitimacy to the Assembly as a political actor and widely disseminating

its petition in the public sphere. The Government and high-ranking public officials were forced to acknowledge the Assembly's claims and negotiate with some of the poorest and most marginalised people in Thai society; Chavalit's government guaranteed to address all of the grievances of the Assembly's petition. In the months that followed, the Government implemented some of its resolutions and set up joint committees with Government, bureaucratic and Assembly representatives to follow through with others. Cabinet cancelled the proposed Saiyaburi Dam and initiated reviews of the four other proposed dams, including Kaeng Sua Ten and Lam Dorm Yai. Cabinet approved compensation for 2526 families affected by the Sirinthorn Dam and 3084 families affected by the Pak Mun Dam, and announced the establishment of a multi-billion baht fund to cover the compensation and began assessing villager claimants. By November 1997 thirteen grievances out of a total of 122 listed in its petition had reached a conclusion satisfactory to the Assembly. The Government paid compensation to 272 families affected by small dams (210 million baht), and to 1154 families whose land was flooded by the Rasi Salai Dam (over 363 million baht). Four petitions on state construction projects were successful, including compensation for 73 families who lost land to a construction project at the Chong Mek border checkpoint (47 million baht). Altogether, the Assembly won over 652 million baht compensation for people affected by development (Assembly of the Poor 1997a, Praphat 1998:207). This was unprecedented in the history of popular activism in Thailand.

Further progress towards honoring the Chavalit government's commitments to the Assembly of the Poor was stopped dead by the economic crisis of 1997 and its political fallout. Chavalit's government collapsed in November 1997 after a no-confidence vote in parliament following the Government's inability to deal decisively with the economic downturn. A

coalition, led by Chuan Leekpai and the Democrat Party, took the reins of government without elections. The Chuan government adopted a hard-nosed attitude to the Assembly and quickly began overturning previous resolutions on the movement's demands (Baker 1999, 2000).

The Assembly initiated a fresh round of demonstrations during 1998 and 1999, this time dispersed throughout the country at strategic localities and sites of conflict, including another rally at the Pak Mun dam site (Assembly of the Poor 1999). To an extent, the *dao krajai*, or 'scattered stars', approach of a concerted array of local protests was a return to earlier pre-Assembly strategies, but in the context of the economic crisis, this 'new' strategy made sense. Assembly advisers told me that the *pho khrua yai* judged that under the aggressive attitude of the Chuan government a large centralised rally was likely to fail. Assembly leaders also recognised that some groups in the movement were more prepared and capable than others to participate in another large rally. Not only were sections of the public weary of frequent protests and less sympathetic, but Assembly members themselves were finding it difficult to sustain the continual protests, both in terms of finding resources but also in terms of motivation and enthusiasm. Returning to protest sites close to home made it easier to mobilise members to participate, to circulate the people and resources to sustain them. As Baker (2000:26) notes, the approach "tacitly reasserted the Assembly's commitment to a locality-based organization and strategy". However, the Assembly also maintained a coordinated and multi-levelled approach, based on a flexible network to mobilise participants and demonstrations to attract attention, as well as media production, information dissemination and public relations in the public sphere; delegations to Government representatives and officials at all levels of government. (I will return to more recent AoP protest rallies below.)

Membership of the Assembly has benefitted the Mun River Villagers' Committee in a range of ways. First, the AoP network has connected them to regional, national and international networks of community organisations, plus NGOs and academics campaigning on environmental and dam issues. Second, the activists and specialist NGOs within the Assembly have helped produce a wide range of media documenting and supporting the Mun River group's campaigns. Third, since 1997 the Mun River Villagers' Committee has gone by the name 'Assembly of the Poor' in all its official activities, protests and press releases; thus, the Mun River group has linked its political identity with that of the broader movement. Finally, the principle political strategy of the Mun River Villagers Committee, like the Assembly of the Poor more broadly, is to mobilise and organise protest rallies and direct action, and its protests are closely coordinated with the Assembly's overall protest campaigns and political goals.

The extensive and far-reaching networks both within the Assembly and others to which it links are a key to its success, as a broad based grassroots movement able to mobilise large numbers of people and also social support from middle class NGOs, the media and other groups. The Dams Network, for example, remains one of the most active within the Assembly, and brings together local people affected by dams already constructed, such as Pak Mun, Rasi Salai, Hua Na and Sirinthorn, as well as local people who stand to be affected by proposed dams such as Kaeng Sua Ten. The Assembly links these dam-affected local groups with regional and international NGOs campaigning on dam issues, such as the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARiN), International Rivers (formally IRN) and Oxfam. It was these strong anti-dam networks, linking local communities of effected people with transnational networks of activists and NGOs, that resulted in the Assembly of the Poor hosting the 'Second International Meeting of Dam

Affected People and their Allies' on the Mun River near the Rasi Salai dam in 2003 (see below).

These networks have proved to be very effective in mobilising resources and expertise for sophisticated media production. Over the years activists have helped the Mun River Villagers' Committee produce a number of short videos and video CDs about local fishing livelihoods and the effects of the Pak Mun Dam, many of which have been subtitled with English and distributed to international allies, as well as distributed to Bangkok-based NGOs and TV stations such as iTV. The AoP secretarial office and other NGO allies also produce books, magazines, websites, media releases, posters, stickers, t-shirts, flags, banners, handcraft products, music tapes and art works, to publicise and support Assembly campaigns (Friends of the People 2005). The production and publication of local and oppositional forms of knowledge about the environmental and social impacts of the dam has been particularly important for the Pak Mun group, which has continually faced claims by Government agencies and members of the Government that there is little or no scientific data to support their claims about the dam's impact on fisheries.

An issue that has faced the Pak Mun group has been how to represent their collective identity in relation to the Assembly of the Poor, which quickly became nationally famous after the mass demonstrations in Bangkok in 1996 and 1997. In or around 1997, the Villagers' Committee for the Rehabilitation of Life and Livelihoods on the Mun River decided to represent itself from then on simply as the 'Assembly of the Poor' and capitalise on the fame and political capital of the name. The Pak Mun group had become one of the key hubs in the AoP's network in northeast Thailand, and regarded themselves as a leading group in the movement,

so the change of campaign name made sense. However, there was also a risk of obscuring their specific local identity and political goals, as grounded in their relationship to the lower Mun River and the impacts of the Pak Mun Dam, within the large number (over 120) of diverse and complex local groups making up the Assembly. Indeed, by 2001 some key leaders in the Pak Mun group were complaining openly that they should have retained their distinct local identity and name.

The World Commission on Dams Case Study

The World Commission on Dams (WCD) and its case study of the Pak Mun Dam marked an important turning point in local responses to the dam and community campaign strategies. Established in 1998, the WCD was created and funded by a range of governments, NGOs, multilateral organizations including the World Bank, and dam industry groups, to investigate the impacts and development benefits of large dams throughout the world. The case study of the Pak Mun Dam was one of eight detailed case studies undertaken by the WCD as part of its investigations (WCD 2000). According to Foran and Kanokwan (2009:67) the Thai Government agreed to the Pak Mun Dam case study because EGAT and the World Bank “considered it an exemplary project”. However, by this time the dam had achieved notoriety nationally and internationally for mass demonstrations over its social and ecological impacts.

The WCD case study fueled tensions and controversies over the Pak Mun Dam. In February 2000, Thai experts and academics commissioned by the WCD presented a draft report of their findings, immediately supplying ammunition for the Mun River Villager’s Committee’s campaign. Their draft report was immediately translated into Thai and widely disseminated.

This early information anticipated the findings of the final report, but at the time the WCD cautioned that the draft had yet to be reviewed by independent experts.

The WCD officially launched its global report on dams in Bangkok and other cities around the world on 24th November 2000. Apart from the Pak Mun case study, the WCD's global review of dams presented a powerful critique of large dams as strategies of development. The WCD Final Report (Amornsakchai et al. 2000) on the Pak Mun Dam presented a number of findings about the dam's economic, social and ecological benefits and costs. The report found that in terms of the amount of hydroelectric power generated, the dam was not economically justifiable. The study confirmed what local people had been claiming for years – that the dam had drastic impacts on the fish ecology and fishing economy of the river. Fifty natural rapids located upstream from the dam wall had been permanently inundated and consequently “50 species of rapid dependent fish have disappeared” (Amornsakchai et al. 2000:4). The fish ladder was ineffective, and of 256 species of fish recorded in the river before the dam's completion, WCD surveys found that 169 species had disappeared or were greatly reduced in number. “The fish catch directly upstream of the dam has declined by 60 to 80 percent.” Fish yields on the river had declined by an estimated US\$1.4 million per annum. The report found that all of this dramatic decline in fish numbers and diversity could not be attributed solely to the Pak Mun Dam, but rather the dam was one significant factor in a range of causes including “water resources and hydropower development in Chi-Mun river watershed, deforestation, domestic waste water discharge, agriculture intensification and development, fisheries, industrial waste water discharge, saline soils” (ibid, p. 90).

New Goals and New Protests: Opening the Dam

In the context of national and international publicity generated by the WCD process, in April 2000 the Mun River Villagers' Committee decided to make a significant change to their campaign goals that carried far reaching implications for their ability to mobilize people in collective action and protest. Committee leaders announced, in dramatic fashion, that they would seize and destroy the dam wall on 15th May. About 1000 people congregated in the protest village near the dam wall in preparation. They staged a largely symbolic and nonviolent action, occupying the crest of the dam wall in a symbolic siege, but they took a risky approach and sealed off entry to the dam's operating control rooms, denying EGAT employees and maintenance engineers access. They used this symbolic siege to proclaim their new goal; abandoning their petition for financial compensation for destruction of local fishing livelihoods since 1994, the Assembly of the Poor now called for the rehabilitation of the Mun River by opening the dam gates for four months each year during the rainy season to allow the natural migration of spawning fish (Bangkok Post 27th April 2000). Villagers leaders told me at the time that, frustrated with their failure to win compensation, they had decided to make a stand that would demonstrate that their ultimate concern was not a selfish desire for compensation, but the environmental value and fishing ecology of the river.

This civil disobedience, blockading the dam operations center, forced the authorities to respond and negotiate with the Assembly. The Assembly had established the *Mae Mun Man Yuen* ('Mun River Endures') protest village near the dam a year earlier, but had been virtually ignored by the Government. Allied organizations, such as the Confederation for Democracy, some senators-elect and student groups, publically called for the Chuan Government to respond to the Assembly's

demands and resolve the standoff peacefully. Protestors also took the symbolic siege to Bangkok, with about two hundred villagers climbing the walls of Government House compound early in the morning of 28th May 2000. Within two weeks, the Government came to the negotiating table and commissioned a committee to assess sixteen specific issues contained in the Assembly of the Poor's petition, including the Pak Mun Dam (Bangkok Post 7th July 2000). The committee's findings, which came to be called the Bantorn Commission, were announced on 6th July 2000 and came out overwhelmingly in support of the Assembly's petition. The Bantorn Commission called for the Pak Mun and Rasi Salai Dam gates to be opened for four months during the wet season and for a study of the outcomes (Independent Committee 2000). The Science Ministry announced that it would open all sluice gates on the Rasi Salai Dam for two years to enable recovery of the fish ecology (Bangkok Post 7th July 2000), but apart from that the Government remained silent on the Bantorn Commission's recommendations.

In an effort to keep up their pressure on the Government in the wake of the Commission's recommendations, on 12th July about 700 Assembly of the Poor members travelled to Bangkok to set up a protest site in front of Government House, naming the site another *Mae Mun Man Yuen* village. Newspapers reported 2000 to 3000 protestors at its peak, but the rally was to prove long-lasting, establishing a real and symbolic presence for nine months. Finally, the Government announced some responses to the Bantorn Commission's recommendations. The Chuan cabinet resolved to open the Pak Mun Dam gates, but only after EGAT had already opened the dam in an effort to manage rising floodwaters (as the Mekong rises during the wet season, the river does not flow fast enough to drive the turbines).

By November 2000, the Government and EGAT were showing signs of frustration with the Assembly's persistence. On 7th November several hundred riot police dispersed protesters blocking the entrance to Government House in an attempt to obstruct a cabinet meeting. Then, two weeks later on 19th November a group of men attacked the protest village at the Pak Mun Dam, burning most of their huts and make-shift shelters to the ground. Few villagers were present at the time, as many had travelled to Bangkok to join the rally there. Thirty or so protesters who resisted were attacked and injured. According to the *Bangkok Post* (21st November 2000), EGAT admitted that they had hired the perpetrators to evict the protesters from EGAT property. Newspapers and Assembly villagers who were there at the time reported that police stood by and did nothing to intervene. One commentator argued that EGAT had strategically exploited the power vacuum in Thai politics during the lead up to the national elections scheduled for the following January (*Nation* 24th November 2000).

After the election of the Thai Rak Thai Party in January 2001, after which Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister, the numbers at the protest village at the Pak Mun Dam rose to about 1000 as the Assembly submitted a revised petition to the new Government, reiterating their claims for the dam to be opened and also returning to their demand for financial compensation for loss of fishing livelihoods over the years since the dam's commissioning. By April, Government representatives negotiating with the Assembly had worked out a series of resolutions on their petitions, including opening the Pak Mun Dam for four months each year, suspension of a dam project in Sisaket, recognition of forest-dwellers land rights, land compensation for 2500 villagers affected by the Sirinthorn Dam and suspension of field trials for GM crops. On 12th April the Assembly packed up their protest at Government

House and returned home after Thaksin joined the protesters in a farewell *Su khwan* ceremony.

On 25th May 2001, Thaksin visited the Pak Mun Dam and demanded that EGAT comply with the Government resolution to open the gates. Numbers in the protest village swelled to a few thousand to coincide with his visit. EGAT finally complied on 16th June. Assembly members celebrated the occasion with a ceremony welcoming fish back into the river. At the same time, the Government commissioned a study of the ecological and fishing outcomes of the dam's opening by a consultancy agency also responsible for the EIA of Kaeng Sua Ten Dam, a choice that worried the Assembly (*Bangkok Post* 17th June 2001).

By October, Assembly activists began to voice their frustration with Thaksin's Government. As usual, committees had been formed, meetings taken place but little concrete action taken. On 9th October 2001, about 130 villagers from the Assembly began a 'long march' from the Pak Mun Dam towards Bangkok, calling for the Pak Mun, Sirinthorn and Rasi Salia dams to be decommissioned. Clearly, the Assembly was trying to reproduce the success of the earlier long marches by the ASFN and Mun River villagers during the early 1990s (see Somchai 2006, Missingham 2003). The marchers distributed leaflets and presented their case to people along the way, gathering signatures on their petition.

On 11th December 2001, the Thaksin cabinet resolved to keep the Pak Mun Dam's sluice gates open for a one-year period, accepting "an argument from its AOP member that the study needed a full year to observe all seasonal effects" (Foran and Manoram 2009: 70). In October 2002, Thaksin's cabinet, "resolved that Pak Mun would henceforth be operated with a four-month seasonal opening" and restated that

resolution in January 2003 (Foran and Manoram 2009: 71). This government policy was briefly overturned by the military-appointed government of Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, which resolved in June 2007 to keep the dam closed year round. This decision appeared to be based on a survey organized by local government officials of 8091 households in the lower Mun Basin about their attitude to operating the Pak Mun Dam, which found that the great majority of respondents supported closure of the dam. The Assembly of the Poor responded with a protest rally in Bangkok. “After pressure from NGOs, academics and criticism in the broadsheet print media, the Surayud government finally resolved in July 2007 to delegate decision-making about Pak Mun’s opening and closing to the provincial governor” (Foran and Manoram 2009: 73). The Governor reinstated the four month opening and established a Provincial Pak Mun Dam Commission to make decisions about opening and closing dates and to mediate disputes between local people and EGAT. Academics from Ubon Ratchathani University, NGO activists and local villagers participate in the Commission.

International Networking:

The Rivers for Life Conference, November 2003

The ‘Second International Meeting of Dam Affected People and their Allies’ was hosted by the Assembly of the Poor on the banks of the Mun River near the Rasi Salai Dam over four days in November 2003. The event focussed attention on the Rasi Salai Dam, about 200 kilometers upstream from the Pak Mun Dam, but the event was also very significant for the Mun River Villagers Organisation, as it placed them and the Assembly of the Poor at the center of an international network of activists, NGOs and community groups involved in anti-dam campaigns.

The International Rivers Network played the key organizing role at the international level, but within Thailand the Assembly of the Poor and the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARiN) organized volunteers, laborers and building materials to construct the conference venue on land that had previously been inundated by the Rasi Salai Dam. A large open-sided meeting hall, toilet and shower block, as well as bamboo huts for dormitories and meeting rooms, were all constructed especially for the conference. Over 300 people from 62 countries attended.

The conference was not a public event intended to attract media attention. Rather, the conference sought to strengthen the international anti-dam movement by building relationships and networks, sharing knowledge and experience, and enabling discussions and workshops on campaign strategies for activists and community groups. For example, there were workshops evaluating progress and achievements over the five years since the first international conference, on the pro-dam 'mafia' by Patrick McCully, movement building, alternatives to dams, dam decommissioning by delegates from the European Rivers Network, and water harvesting by Indian activists. There was much discussion of the World Commission on Dams and its implications for dam-affected communities and anti-dam activists, especially the speed with which the dam industry had made a resurgence after the Commission's report.

Delegates from the Mun River Villagers Committee attended and spoke about the Pak Mun Dam and their campaigns for compensation and opening the dam. A fieldtrip on the third day of the conference took many of the participants to the Pak Mun Dam, to talk with community members there.

There was a great deal of interest among Thai delegates in discussions and workshops on dam decommissioning at the conference. The site of the conference – on land a few hundred meters from the Mun River that had been submerged by the Rasi Salai Dam – symbolized the potential for civil society groups to force governments to decommission, or at least open dams and rehabilitate riverine ecologies. The gates of the Rasi Salai Dam had been open since July 2000; the Government resolution to open the PakMun for four months each year had been announced the year before and the dam had opened for twelve months (IRN 2004). In workshops on local resource management there was a great deal of interest among international participants in the *Thai Baan* research undertaken by local Mun River villagers, with the help of NGO activists and some academics; research into local fishing knowledge and changes to fish ecology during the opening of the Pak Mun Dam for one year from mid-2001.

Decline of the Assembly of the Poor

Despite these limited gains over Pak Mun Dam operations, during the last decade the Assembly of the Poor as a whole has been unable to make much progress in terms of the specific goals and demands expressed in its petitions and campaigns. There is considerable frustration and disillusionment among Assembly members and their activist allies about their failure to gain support in the media or broader Thai public sphere, or to influence government decision-makers or policies. The reasons for this seem to be multiple and complex, but I would like to emphasise four key explanations here.

Successive governments have appeased Assembly protests with public promises to address their problems and petitions, and then tied them up in lengthy bureaucratic committee

processes which announce symbolic decisions, but which have resulted in little action, exacerbated by the unstable political contexts following the economic crisis of 1997 and the military coup of 2006. For instance, the military-installed government initially refused to honour the resolutions of the Thaksin government to open the Pak Mun Dam for four months each year, and then referred the dam opening decisions to a provincial level committee in Ubon Ratchathani.

Governments and authorities have often set out to attack the legitimacy and credibility of the Assembly and its member groups, portraying them as troublemakers motivated by greed rather than real problems, or as a “paid mob” manipulated by a powerful “third hand” such as opposition political parties, or even as manipulated by NGOs whose ideological agendas are determined by foreign funders and hence undermine Thai national interests (Prasitiporn 2004).

Another common strategy has been for state officials or powerful influential figures to use their authority or financial resources to mobilise people, often in extra-legal ways, against the Assembly of the Poor. An example is the violent mob which attacked and burned down the Mae Mun Man Yuen protest camp near the Pak Mun Dam in 2000 during Chuan Leekpai’s prime ministership. In 2007, an organised group of Kamnan’s and Village Heads mobilised 3000 villagers for a pro-dam rally at the Ubon Provincial Hall, calling on the Government to keep the dam operating (Foran and Manoram 2009: 72). A more subtle example appears to have been the survey of local attitudes to Pak Mun dam operations conducted by local Village Heads and Tambon Heads in 2007, which claimed to find “overwhelming support for dam closure” among over 20,000 respondents (Foran and Manoram 2009: 72). As Foran and Manoram (2009) point out, the fact that this was a non-confidential survey raises questions about its validity; also the primary data were never made available for public scrutiny.

In the context of this range of strategies by successive governments and state officials, using bureaucratic red tape to undermine and attack the legitimacy of the Assembly, groups and individuals within the movement have come under a great deal of pressure as their individual and family resources have been exhausted. Years of organising, campaigning and protesting, locally, in Bangkok and in other places, have taken their toll on members' health and family resources, as well as their energy and enthusiasm. The intractability of successive governments and declining individual resources and livelihoods seem to have also exacerbated internal tensions and conflicts within the Assembly.

Such issues were discussed openly at an Assembly conference in 2007. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth of December 2007, Assembly delegates met together to celebrate and discuss the previous twelve years experience of the Assembly of the Poor³. The first two days of the meeting took place at Sulak Srivalak's Garden of Fruition Center (*suan nguen me ma*) in Bangkok. About 80 delegates attended, most of them grassroots delegates from the different member groups of the Assembly, as well as NGO activists, activist academics and activist lawyers. The Mun River Villagers Committee also sent a small delegation. The mood of the meeting was one of disappointment and frustration, as very little progress had been made by any of the member groups over the previous decade. As one of the delegates said in his address, "Our campaigns have not achieved results... the government has not addressed our problems." Villagers talked of feeling "tired, discouraged, demoralised" and of slipping further into poverty as a result of over a decade of campaign and protest activities.

³ The following account is based on my participation in and observations at the conference.

Clear tensions in the relationships between NGOs, NGO activists and the community-based organisations who make up the grassroots membership of the Assembly were articulated and discussed both formally and informally at the meeting. The previous year (2006), the Assembly had effectively 'sacked' its Secretarial Office, which had until then acted in the role of Bangkok-based NGO Friends of the People, according to some insiders for ideological reasons relating to relationships with the State. Since that time the Assembly has had no centralised secretarial office, and the highly mobile NGO activist advisors have taken on the role. This distancing from Friends of the People also indicates a change in the relationship between the Assembly and the broader NGO sector. Another aspect of this tension between activists and community organisations is the concern about losing very experienced professional activists from the Assembly. Some have left to take up other jobs and other roles, and some key figures have died. Early in 2007 Suwit Watnoo, a Bangkok-based advisor to the Slum Network, died of a heart attack at only 54 years of age. Wanida Tanti-withayapithak died only a few weeks previously after a long illness. Some villagers spoke of putting "too much hope in our *phi liang* [advisors] team". A leader from the Pak Mun group spoke of experiencing many "problems" with their NGO advisors, which had taught them to rely on their own leaders and less on NGOs. Other delegates argued that this dependence on NGO advisors for secretarial, communication and coordinating roles had meant that leadership and coordinating skills had not been developed and fostered among the villager members.

What this conference on the previous twelve years of the Assembly of the Poor highlighted for me, was that the movement was mostly employing the same protest and campaign strategies that had raised it to national and international prominence in 1996 and 1997, and which had been so

effective at that time. The political, social and economic contexts in Thailand had constantly changed over that time – with the economic crisis, then the Thaksin Government, then the military coup – but the Assembly had largely failed to find new or innovative strategies within those rapidly changing conditions. In a way, the Assembly failed to capitalise on the mass constituency, extensive networks and political capital it developed in the 1990s and seek new forms of organising and campaigning (such as establishing a new grassroots political party).

Mun River Agricultural Cooperative

One of the most visible and enduring expressions of local organized opposition to the Pak Mun Dam has been the Mun River Cooperative and its headquarters at Sai Mun Village in Phibun Mangsahan District. The Cooperative purchased land and arranged construction in 1999, in a prominent location on the Ubon-Kong Jiam Road, just a few minutes drive from the Mun River Villagers' Center. The buildings and site were meant to express the Cooperative leaders' pride in the historical events which led to the Government compensation payments that established the Cooperative. At the center of the complex is a large two-storey building which houses a museum on the ground floor and an open sided meeting hall above it. Nearby is a small kitchen building and two cabins, all perched around the edge of a large pond. The working end of the Cooperative also features a large storage shed, and attached to it a set of offices, meeting rooms and a bathroom. The museum stands as a record of the local fishing culture that has largely disappeared since the dam was built, and houses a wide variety of traditional fishing implements such as a range of bamboo traps, nets, jars of fish preserved in formaldehyde, photographs, paintings, and sculptures commemorating community protests against the dam.

After the Cooperative moved into its new headquarters in 1999, the center of meeting, organizing and working for the Mun River Villagers' Committee and NGO activists also quickly shifted to the Cooperative, and the old Mun River Villagers Center was abandoned.

The Cooperative performs all the functions of a conventional agricultural cooperative in rural Thailand, as it is required to do so to remain registered as an incorporated cooperative with the Thai Government. The Cooperative buys fertilizer in bulk and then sells it on to members. It purchases cassava from members and sells to agribusiness buyers. It supports a women's group who make brooms and then sells them through the Cooperative in bulk orders. Early in its life the Cooperative paid dividends to members, but since its funds have been used for construction and other purposes it has not been able to continue doing so.

However, the Cooperative functions in other ways too. It has become the geographical center for community organization and campaigning about the Pak Mun Dam and regularly hosts Mun River Villager Committee meetings in the hall above the Museum. It provides a small amount of financial support for members' travel costs to attend Mun River Villagers' Committee meetings and protests. The museum exhibits and celebrates the history of the community campaigns and protests through photographs, maps, paintings, sculpture and written texts. The Cooperative also houses the community radio, which since 2004 has been a local mass media voice against the dam (see below).

Like the Mun River Villagers Committee and organized opposition to the Pak Mun Dam, the Cooperative has been riven by conflict. When it was established, the Cooperative boasted almost 2500 members, but two significant groups

have split from it over disputes about the economic purposes and activities of the Cooperative, and it currently has 1195 registered members.

'Voice of the Mun River': Community Radio and Activism

During the last decade, and in the context of the 1997 Constitution and relaxation of community radio regulations in 2004, community radio has expanded rapidly in Thailand. This has been paralleled by flourishing of community radio throughout the developing world, as multilateral agencies such as UNESCO and development NGOs have recognized its potential to support community participation and empowerment. The NGO Thai Volunteer Service (TVS), which has long supported community organization and networking with the aim of building civil society and supporting popular participation and democratic reform in Thailand, has established 'the Campaign for Popular Media Reform' – a nationwide community media advocacy program – to support the promotion of grassroots media (especially community radio)” (Bach 2008: 33). Through this campaign, TVS has raised money (approximately 200,000 baht) to enable existing community organizations to purchase the necessary equipment to set up small radio studios and broadcasting stations, and has arranged training for community members. TVS and their Campaign for Popular Media Reform Coordinator have worked closely with the Mun River Villagers Organisation and the Assembly of the Poor for many years, and have encouraged them to start up a community radio station.

The obvious choice for the location of the new community radio station was the Mun River Agricultural Cooperative buildings, which had been constructed in 1999 and then

quickly become the headquarters for community organisation and NGO activism in the area. A small room was equipped and a management committee organised. With funding support from TVS, a six channel radio mixer was installed and a fifteen meter, 30 kilowatt transmitter tower constructed.

When the new community radio station started broadcasting in 2004, station managers sent out an invitation for local people to come to the studio on the first day of broadcasting and perform their songs about the river and the dam, which would also be recorded. They hoped that ten or fifteen people might turn up, but on the day fifty people arrived to perform and record their music. Subsequently, the station produced and released a CD of the songs recorded on that day, entitled *Siang Mae Mun* (Voices of the Mun River) (Bach 2008). The music performed and recorded that day included northeastern *morlam* songs and *luuk thung* songs, among others.

The station can be received within a fifteen to twenty kilometer radius, depending on conditions, and hence can be heard in about 80 villages in the districts of Phibun, Khong Chiam and Sirinthorn. The radio station broadcasts for three days each week, Friday to Sunday, as most of the DJs are community volunteers. Since it began, all of the staff have been volunteers; in 2008 the staff consisted of eight committee members, two equipment managers and three DJs. The Mun River Cooperative manager also regularly conducts interviews with local community members (recorded on an ipod), which are then broadcast. Bach (2008: 42) writes that:

The radio station has no formal or written constitution, however the station's volunteers believe strongly in...the motto "always serve the community interest". *Siang Mae Mun* is proud of its low-scale community basis and understands its

connection to its community and the local *Isaan* culture...This means that all programs are broadcast in Lao (the regional language) and that local or traditional content and entertainment should always take priority over generic content.

The radio is a voice for the Mun River Villagers Committee and the Mun River Cooperative and their campaigns against the Pak Mun Dam. As one committee member stated,

They [the dam supporters] have their media: They have propaganda leaflets, they have propaganda radio, and they have propaganda television. In the beginning their media always told how good the dam would be for us and the community believed it. We now know that they were lying and that their media was lying. We always knew that it would only be bad news but how could we tell others? We can now use our radio to tell our story and people are listening (*Siang Mae Mun* committee member, quoted in Bach 2008: 51).

Siang Mae Mun regularly reports news about the progress of campaigns, petitions and protests, as well as campaign meetings and negotiations. It also broadcasts *morlam* and other music popular in northeast Thailand, local monks speaking about Buddhism, and community elders who speak about topics such as local history and herbal medicine. The Committee has never had the resources to conduct a listener survey to ascertain the quantitative size or geographical spread of their listenership, but they constantly seek informal feedback from local listeners.

They liked to interview me because I was a leader of our people's movement. I would talk about our problems with the dam, many problems, and complex problems. Later on, when I would see myself on the televisions or hear myself on the radio I would not be saying what I wanted to say, I even looked and sounded silly sometimes. They would cut all the important parts out. No one could understand our movement because we could not talk for ourselves... Even you (talking to me) will not be able to tell our story, or the story of our radio station, because you are not us, you cannot understand like we do... Having this radio station was always a dream because then we could tell our story ourselves (*Siang Mae Mun* Committee member, quoted in Bach 2008: 58).

Conclusion

By 2007, many members of the Mun River Villagers' Committee were saying that fighting against the Pak Mun Dam was their karma (*kam*), their destiny in life. Representing their collective identity as fishers, whose lives and livelihoods are 'bound up with the river', has been a long-standing strategy underlying the mobilisation and representation of their grievances to the State, but this kind of talk showed a new form of identity being expressed – an identity created through mobilisation, collective action and protest. The Mun River Villagers' Committee has achieved some limited and ambiguous success in its goals of opening the gates of, and ultimately decommissioning, the Pak Mun Dam, but by abandoning its claim for financial compensation for members, the organisation has been unable to mobilise as many supporters for its

activities and campaigns in recent years, when compared to the heady days of the mid-1990s. Internal conflicts have split the Villagers' Committee and the Pak Mun Cooperative. The Assembly of the Poor continues to petition and protest, but appears to be less unified and less effective than a decade ago, and running out of innovative ideas for political struggle. Nevertheless, after almost twenty years, the Pak Mun Dam remains "perpetually contested" (Foran and Manoram 2009) and local villagers and their national and international NGO allies continue to campaign and protest, and seek creative forms of struggle such as through music and community radio. As Foran and Manoram (2009) write, their struggle has indeed "contributed to the reshaping of state-society relations in Thailand" and inspired struggles for grassroots democracy.

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