

Developing Alternative Ways of Life for Village Communities in Lower Mun River Area: A Participatory Action Research in Pakdom Village Ubon Ratchathani Province, Northeast Thailand

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Abstract: The main purpose of this research was to develop alternative ways of life for village communities in Northeast Thailand, with two main concepts people's participation and sufficiency economy as the basic guidelines. The experiment action took place at Pakdom village, Phibunmangsan district, Ubon Ratchathani province. A mixed group of 53 key informants were asked to join a focus group discussion in order to provide historical background, current situation and future possibilities. Then a Learning Center was organized on a 9 rai plot on which the experiment was undertaken between January and May, 2008, by a core group of 15 volunteers, chosen from among the Pakdom villagers who participated in the introductory meeting. The instruments included community meeting, field notes, observation forms, unstructured and semi structured interviews, focus groups and photo recording. The collected data were classified into groups according to the objectives and conceptual framework for descriptive analysis and interpretation. The research findings were as follows: the environment and the ways of life of Pakdom community had basically changed from the previous ways of simplicity, living in harmony with the environment and relying on natural resources for their living. The environment has now changed so much that Pakdom villagers can no longer rely on food from nature. They have had to rely on buying food in the market. Pakdom people have begun to realize the problem. At the Learning Center, agricultural activities deemed appropriate for producing food as well as for improving the environment were carried out by the 15 volunteers. They grew vegetables, raised local pigs and hens and raised fish in plastic-coated ponds. What they produced were sufficient for their consumption, cutting the need to buy food from outside. They also fermented organic fertilizers and bio-extracts, using raw materials which could be found in the community. As a result, the environment was also improved, due to the practice of the principles of sufficiency economy and people's participation. In the evaluation of the experiment at the Learning Center, the following findings were revealed. The environment around the Learning Center was better due to the use of organic fertilizers and bio-extracts to improve the soil. The project participants exchanged their various knowledge and experience in the spirit of mutual care and share in the operation of the Learning Center. Thus, the products from growing vegetables, raising animals and fish and fermenting organic fertilizers and bio-extracts provided the members of the project with enough clean and safe food for their own consumption. Working together in the project, they were able to reduce production costs and well as to become self-reliant, leading to their communal well-being and better quality of life. Instead of competing for self-interests, Pakdom villagers have returned to mutual care and share. The spirit of communal cooperation has been retrieved. As such, it is alternative ways of life.

Key words: Alternative village ways of life, community participation, sufficiency economy, lower Mun river area

INTRODUCTION

Before 1990, subsistent economy characterized the Thai community ways of life. People existed on their own

support and mutual help. There are fish in the water, rice in the field and mushrooms in the forest (Pongpit, 2007). Consumable things were plentiful from nature. Villagers did not have to struggle beyond meeting their basic

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needs. Excessive accumulation was not practiced because nature sufficiently provided. People ate simply in order to live, not vice versa.

Thus, it was for the rural ways of life for the Thai people including Esan people in the Northeast. Besides, the Northeast rural people developed a sense of deep bond with nature, as expressed in their beliefs, ceremonies and rituals signifying the maintenance of natural equilibrium (Natsup, 1994).

But fundamental changes have taken place in Thailand, affecting not only nature and the environment but also economic, social and cultural life of the people. This seems to be particularly true with the case of the Mun river basin. The problem is so serious that an alternative must be found to get out of it.

The purpose of this research was therefore, to develop alternative ways of life for village communities in the lower Mun river basin by reorganizing environment conditions based on the principles of people's participation and sufficiency economy. In this connection, 3 specific objectives were identified:

- To study the environment conditions and ways of life of the communities in the lower Mun river basin
- To study the learning experience in environment reorganization to promote community well-being by vegetable growing and animal raising deemed appropriate for the lower Mun river basin environment
- To study the success of the organization of learning project by an evaluation of the environment suitability, the project participants, the project activities, the project outcome and the community well-being

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a participatory action research. Pakdom community in Phibunmangsan, Ubon Ratchathani was chosen as the research site. Situated in lower Mun river basin, the village community consisted of 68 households.

A group of 53 key informants: elders, leaders and adult members of the village plus some agricultural experts from outside were invited to meet in focus group in order to provide historical background, current situation and future possibilities of the Pakdom community.

Based on the criteria and rules commonly agreed upon by the focus group meeting mentioned above, 15 villages were chosen as the core group to work together in the learning center which was specifically set up on 9 rai plot within the village temple ground. The

learning center was meant to experiment in vegetable growing, animal raising, producing organic fertilizers and bio-extracts and seeking the caring and sharing ways of life for Pakdom.

The experiment at the learning center took place from January to May 2008. Then the learning experience was evaluated by the same group of key informants in another round of focus group discussion.

Guiding principle: As mentioned above, the principles of people's participation and sufficiency economy undergirded the experiment at the learning center. The substance of these two principles as applied in this project may be summarized as follows:

The principles of participation: Lowdermilk and Laitos identified 7 phases of people's participation in rural development (Hunpayon, 1985). They are preliminary reconnaissance, priority problem identification studies, search for solutions, assessment of solutions, projects implementations, project evaluations and project reconsideration and completion. Furthermore, Uphoff also discerned 4 dimensions of participation: participation in decision making, participation in the execution of activities, participation in the benefits and participation in the evaluation (Amornwiwat, 1994).

The principle of sufficiency economy has been advocated by H.M. the King of Thailand. It has been nationally acclaimed. There are 3 components to this principle: Sufficiency means just right, not too little nor too much. It is sustainable and capable of meeting all basic needs. Sufficiency economy requires common decision by all stakeholders. Internal assurance or immunity, including the following concepts: Preparedness to meet all challenges, locality-based self-reliance, learning from experience, systemic and strategic planning, inter-relatedness of production, consumption, saving, social welfare, health, environment and community economy. In addition, two main conditions must be kept in mind at all times in sufficiency economy: well-rounded knowledge, carefulness and the use of appropriate technology in planning and action, morality, consciousness, integrity, honesty, endurance, perseverance and reliance on wisdom in all life conducts (Piput, 2007).

Factors affecting economic, social and cultural changes in Pakdom community: From documentary research and focus group discussion with key informants from Pakdom community, it was found that both external and internal factors affected their economic, social and cultural ways of life.

External factors: Three main external factors contributed to the changes: the construction of railroad to Nakon Ratsima, the Chinese immigration into Thailand and the bowring treaty.

- The opening of Nakon Ratsima railroad in 1900 brought modernization to the outlying towns in the Mun river basin. The trains transported goods and labour from Northeastern provincial towns to Bangkok. More and more people made their living buying and selling in the market system (Taweasin, 1982). Thus, the railroad construction reaching the Mun river basin was an important point of economic, social and cultural changes in the towns along the Mun river as well as in other communities in the lower Mun river basin, including Pakdom
- The need for more labour in Thailand (Siam) in the beginning of Bangkok era attracted more Chinese immigrants. In the Mun river area, the Chinese immigrants acted both as middlemen between Bangkok and the provincial towns and as retailers among these towns. In effect they brought cash economy into the area. In the case of Pakdom community, the Chinese acted as promoter and buyer of agriculture produce, bringing money to play the dominant role in the community's ways of life
- In 1855, a treaty was signed between Siam and England. Known as the John Bowring Treaty, it gave birth to free trade and production for market. As a result of this treaty trades between Bangkok and the provincial towns in the Mun river basin gradually increased (Fine Arts Department, 1968)

Together, these three external factors brought money and market economy into the Mun river communities. As such the old ways of production for self-sufficiency, self-support and self-reliance have changed to new ways of production for market, dependency on others and money value.

Internal factors: The changes in the ways of life and the environment conditions of Pakdom community were also brought about by three internal factors: the village fun policy of the Kukrit Pramoj government, the construction of Pakmun Dam and the government's reclaim of community land in connection with the Dam construction.

- Beginning in 1978, the village fun policy of Kukrit pramoj government allotted a good sum of money to all villages in Thailand. The Fun was earmarked for the construction of communal infra structures such as making or improving village roads and digging or

enlarging irrigation canals. Previously such activities were undertaken by voluntary cooperation among the villagers themselves at the advice of village elders or abbots. The village fun changed all that by the system of wage labour (12 bath/cubic meter). Like other villages, Pakdom community as changed her economic, social and cultural ways from communal reciprocal help to wage labour. That was what people received from Kukrit's village fun (Naeandee, 2008)

- The construction of Pakmun Dam was meant by the government to provide additional electricity power for the Northeast. Completed in 1994, the Dam forced 4,000 households to relocate because their lands were either reclaimed or submerged (EGAT, 2007). For Pakdom, like other villages below the Dam, people could no longer make their living by catching fish as before because of the drastic decrease of fish. Besides, some kinds of fish became extinct because the Dam prevents the mother fish from Mekong River to come and lay eggs in the upper Mun river or its tributaries. This has led people to depend on fish from market or other sources (Naeandee, 2008)
- As already mentioned above, the construction of Pakmun Dam forced the relocation of 4,000 households. To solve this problem, the then government reclaimed about 1,000 rai of community land in Kham Kaenkoon forest which was previously used by Pakdom and other communities such as Thin Samran, Sap Chareon and Don Khammee. The land was divided and given to the relocated households, 15 rai each, by way of compensation. However, this land reclaim took away the sources of livelihood of the people who used it before. New villages sprang up all over, It is no longer possible to pick mushrooms, fire woods and natural vegetables. Hunting for food was also gone. People had to turn to the market for everything (Khamkoon, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Environment and ways of life of Pakdom villagers in lower Mun river basin: In the fertile area, where smaller Dom river runs into the Mun river, Pakdom community came into being >100 years ago by a group of 7-8 families migrating from Ban Taphai, Ban Pa-aow and Ban Sathorn villages. In their new habitat, the migrants found natural abundance for their livelihood. Pakdom today remains relatively small, with 253 inhabitants in 68 households occupying an area of 320 km².

Traditionally Pakdom villagers lived simple life in harmony with nature relying on abundant natural resources in the rivers and the surrounding forest for their

livelihood. Popular Buddhism, beliefs in the spirit and respect for the elders as well as family ties undergirded and motivated their ways of life.

Over the years both external and internal factors have brought about fundamental changes to their environment and ways of economic, social and cultural life. No longer able to relying on food from natural resources, they have turned to wage labour and the market. In effect, money economy dominates their ways of life. Traditional values are weakened but not altogether gone. New values have been accepted. Their ways are no longer simple. They are faced with new problems especially excessive debts. They have felt a strong needs to find the alternatives.

Organizing learning experience to improve the environment and to promote community well-being at Pakdom:

Central to our research design, a Learning Center was planned, organized and executed. On the 9 rai plot of land at the village temple ground, a carefully selected group of 15 villagers volunteered to join hands and carry out the activities of this experiment which lasted from January to May of 2008. The principles of participation and sufficiency economy constituted the guidelines for the operation of the Learning Center.

In the spirit of mutual care and share, the 15 volunteers undertook the following project activities; during the 5 months period:

- They grew 6 kinds of vegetables which are needed for daily consumption in the community
- They raised native pigs and local hens, because they are strong, easy to keep and they give good yield
- They raised two kinds of fish in plastic coated ponds because they are easy to keep and relatively more immune to disease
- They fermented organic fertilizers and bio-extracts for better produce as well as for soil enrichment, doing away with chemical fertilizers
- For all the above activities, the 15 volunteers not only prepared the ground but also built necessary shelters, each contributing both labour and building materials

Evaluating the success of the experiment at the Pakdom learning center in lower Mun river basin:

- Regarding the environment and ways of life, it was found that the environment has been improved. By the use of organic fertilizes and bio-extracts, the soil became more fertile. The products from the project-vegetables, pigs, hens and fish-were plentiful for the households, while at the same time the needs to buy things from the market were substantially reduced

- With regard to the participants in the Learning Center experiment, it was found that they possessed diversified vocational skills and experience and held various social roles and positions in the community. All this contributed to their successful planning and operation of the various project activities
- On the economic side, it was found in the calculation of costs and benefits of all activities that at market price they all made handsome profits. But instead of selling, they shared the fruits of their work within the community
- With regard to the well-being of the villagers and of the Pakdom community, four indicators were considered: Safety food, self-reliance, mutual care and share and good environment

For the first indicator, safety food, all the products of the Learning Center were free of poisonous substance and therefore safe. Regarding self-reliance, the 15 volunteers were keen in this matter. Therefore, they gave generously both labour and materials in carrying out the project activities. On mutual care and share, it was evident that both in the operation of the project and the management of the fruits of their work the 15 volunteers exemplified the spirit of mutual care and share, both in times of difficulties and in times of enjoyment. This fact proved Prawes (1999) thesis that deep down rural communities still maintain the culture of mutual help. And finally regarding good environment, the experience of the Learning Center demonstrated that the dry and somehow deserted temple land of 9 rai was revived by the use of organic fertilizers and bio-extracts. This proved the truth advocated by Sakarik (1981) and Wisalo (1988), who believe that organic farming maintains and/or restores natural balance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research revealed that over the years the environment of Pakdom community has completely changed. Basically, the abundant natural resources in the forests, the rivers and the soil have been destroyed. Today Pakdom villagers can hardly make their living from fishing in the rivers or picking edible things from the forests. They have had to earn petty wages from various menial hirings in town to which they commute daily. Some of them have to go farther to other towns and many to Bangkok. During the research, 60 Pakdom villagers from the 68 households were away from home engaged in migrant labour. That was 88.24%. Most of them were young; some were married. Mainly older persons and children remain at home. The money which Pakdom migrant workers sent back was merely for family survival

and debt payment. For the villagers who did not go away to labour outside, few work options were available: selling charcoals or seasonal hirings-nothing certain, noting sustainable.

In short, the way of life in Pakdom have changed from simple production and reliance on finding food stuff from the forests and fish from the Mun river and tributaries to dependency on buying food from the market or roving merchants who visit the village daily. Life for Pakdom villagers has become a hard struggle for survival almost totally dependent on outside resources. Money has taken over from production for own consumption and self-reliance. Market economy has come to reign supreme.

Pakdom people felt a strong need to find a way out of this condition. One way to do this was to organize learning experience in mixed agriculture, such as organic gardening and animal raising, as demonstrated in to Pakdom Learning Center, which was meant to promote community well-being and to improve the environment. It was a development model with four indicators: safety food, self-reliance, mutual care and share and good environment.

The development of Pakdom village community in order to find alternative ways of life as well as to improve the environment was not only possible but also commendable. Among the most important lessons include the following. Based on the principles of participation and sufficiency economy, the experiment in organic farming at the Pakdom Learning Center was not only successful but it also rekindled and revitalized the communal cultural values of mutual care and share. As such, this may be called alternative ways of life quite appropriate for rural village communities in lower Mun river basin and perhaps in similar situations elsewhere as well.

Therefore, it is recommended that the findings of this research can be used as guidelines for the development of other rural communities.

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