

Research Project Evaluation: “Empowerment without NGOs: Hill Tribes & Land Rights”

The aim of the project was to investigate and observe the current situation of land usage and rights maintenance amongst hill tribes in northern Thailand’s Chiang Mai/Chiang Rai regions and parts of Myanmar. Fieldwork would consist of discussing the present situation via interviews with locals and academic experts who were involved with the issue at local universities.

The fieldwork was successful as it facilitated a deeper understanding of the surrounding land rights systems and management styles that were under current use in the region and allowed for a more sophisticated knowledge in what current obstacles and problems are occurring to prevent peoples from gaining access to basic human security in the face of continued and consistent development.

The fieldwork specifically allowed for interviews and assessments of Karen, Kachin, and other tribes located in the hill regions of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand. Site visits were carried out to various NGOs such as IMPECT and various Catholic missions in the upper mountain regions to gain an understanding of what land resources local villagers would use in order to continue their daily lives and how the introduction of development concepts (private land, wage-labor systems) affect people who were previously living sustainable lives and now are faced with competing in an expanded market that does not favor their needs or priorities.

As a result the project has concluded with a new direction from which to approach the problem of land rights usage and ensuring basic human security to those whose land has become endangered. Much of what was observed, as having worked for the village populations was the consistent use of public commons as a source for fuel, food, and housing. With the introduction of development projects much of this land was privatized and placed the village in danger of not being able to successfully manage the resources for daily, sustainable living. The project has begun on focusing on ways to deliver this prior sustainability with the creation of new common spaces that will allow villagers to have a security net upon which to use in the case that development continues to fail them. This “new commons” will attempt to combine technological advances in networking and environmental sustainability, but at its core will drive the creation of a system that the villagers are already familiar with as having used for many generations prior to the systems that are currently placing them under adverse conditions.

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