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Civil Society in the Chi River, Northeast Thailand

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University, Auckland,
New Zealand.**

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ABSTRACT

The thesis ‘Civil Society in the Chi River, Northeast Thailand’, aims to answer the questions of what civil society means in the Northeast Thai village context, which factors make civil society proactive and how civil society is activated. Participatory action research (PAR) was carried out in two communities in the Chi River Basin to answer the inquiries.

The research discusses the contexts of the Northeast Region and the two communities in the Chi River Basin. The people in this area are of the Thai-Laos ethnic group and hold particular beliefs in an amalgam of Buddhism and animism which creates cultural rituals that are different from other regions. The society is based on kinship ties. The economic situation has transformed from an agrarian society to a commercial agriculture society.

Through the research process the new term of ‘grounded civil society’ was created. It means ‘the sphere of an autonomous group of local people who actively participate in collective action to deal with their struggles and promote their common interests by mobilizing cultural and social capitals in consort with other people to productively solve their problems. Grounded civil society may include traditional forms of mutual assistance, and formal or informal social associations. It seeks to have a significant influence on public policy at any level’.

The research found that grounded civil society was activated by both outside and inside factors. The outside factors included the negative effect of government development projects and the intervention of the participatory action research, which stimulated local people to engage in civil society. The inside factors activating civil society were the poor economic conditions of the villagers and the social capital existing in the communities. The social capital was built up around kinship ties and cultural capital, which generated the social values and norms of the local people. The research concluded with an analysis of the causal links between social capital and civil society claiming that social capital facilitated the creation of civil society. Further research possibilities are suggested.

DEDICATION

For my parents who had encouraged and supported me in my education.

I am saddened that they did not live to see my successful education.

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GLOSSORY OF THAI TERMS

Buaed Pa	tree ordination ritual.
Bun Sungkatan	the ritual organized for making a merit in the Buddhist Lent.
Bun Huay Nam Khem	the ritual organized to pay respect to the Ilone'spirit in Nong Phue and the nearby villages.
Bun and baab	merit and demerit.
Bun Kathin	a ceremony to make a merit for ancestors.
Clum	cluster administration unit in a village.
Cham	a person who communicates with supernatural spirits.
Isan	refers to the Northeast Region and the people who live there.
Isan Khiaw	the green revolutions project in the Northeast.
Chao Muang	ruler held autonomy to govern huamuang.
huamuang	town and its territory of the former Thai administration system and now replaced by the provincial administration system.
Hiet Sibsong Kong Sibsei	a yearly cycle of rituals of the Isan People.
Long Khaek	the system of a traditional mutual assistance. Villagers help their relatives and neighbours, and then will be assisted in turn when they need help.

Nai Hoi	Isan traders.
Phii	Spirits.
Pu-ta	the Lao version of an ancestor's spirit.
Pha Pa	making a merit by collecting money and necessities and donating these to monks and temples.
Prachakom	civic group.
Prachakom Moo Ban	village civic committee.
Prachakom Tambon	sub-district civic committee.
Prachakom Changwat	provincial civic committee.
Rai	approximately .2529 acres.
Siam	The name of Thailand previously before 1939.
siao	close friend.
Sima Asok	a self-reliant community in Thailand. This group strictly practices Buddhist principles.
Sarakham Pattana Project.	A development project initiated by the ex-governor of Maha Sarakham province.
Thammarat	good governance.
Tai Chi	name used to describe poor people who live near the Chi River Bank.

GLOSSORY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Alternative Agriculture Project	The non-governmental organization which aims to promote and develop alternative agriculture for small scale farmers in small scale agricultural businesses.
BAAC	Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives which mainly gives credit to farmers for investment in agricultural occupations.
Bowring Treaty	The agreement between Siam (Thailand) and Britain in 1855, which aimed at commercial and political issues. It opened up Siam to Western influence and trade.
Brahma	the Hindu god.
Community – Based Organizations (CBOs)	the development groups in a village which may be launched by villagers or promoted by government officers with financial support from the government for operations.
Kong Chi Mun Project	the project which aimed to draw water from the Meakong River to supply irrigation for agriculture production in the Northeast Region.
Local Administration Act 1914	The first law which endorsed the subdivision of local administration organizations.
NESDB	The National Economic and Social Development Board which is the central planning agency undertaking a continuing study of the country's

economy and drawing up plans for its development.

One Tambon One Product

the government project support for each sub-district to select a typical local product based on traditional indigenous expertise and local know-how. The project then assists to develop production, product promotion and marketing.

People's Bank Project

the government project started in 2001, offering small loans to low-income earners through the Government Savings Bank branches across the country, in order to help poor people secure low-interest loans without collateral for their business operation.

Phu-mi-bun Rebellion

Rebellion of the Isan people against local government authorities.

SAO

Sub-district Administrative Organization.

SAOC

Sub-district Administrative Organization Council.

Sambok Rebellion

The rebellion which occurred in Khon Kaen province to refuse paying taxes to the central government.

Supanimit foundation

The non-government agency which aims to help orphans.

Rajaprajanugroh Foundation.

Formed in 1963 under the royal patronage. Literally the word means "mutual help between the King and the people". The foundation aims to give basic assistance to the victims of public hazards and to prepare a public hazard protection

system throughout Thailand, and to give assistance for education to poor children.

The 1997 Constitution

The Sixteenth Constitution in Thailand, which incredibly increased and ensured the rights of Thai people to voice their political opinions. The Constitution launches a more open and accountable political system, and enhances the system of government administration checks and balances.

The National Education Act (1999)

The Act serves as a fundamental law for education reform in a) Learning reform which focuses on student or learners. b) Administrative reform includes upgrading the teaching profession by reorganizing systems and increasing efficiency in the utilization of resources and investment for educational purposes.

The Eighth National Economic and Social Developmental Plan (1997-2001)

The Plan focused on a holistic people-centred development. The Plan is strategy focussed on people's respective potential. Development Strategies included the upgrading of the potential of the target groups at all ages and genders, to encourage popular participation, and to strengthen the economy and the development administration.

Village and Urban Revolving Fund

The government project which funded one million bath (\$ US 25,000) for each community as a loan for individuals and households for local investment and to create new local employment.

PREFACE

'All people, no matter how poor, can develop themselves if they have opportunity to'. This is my motto that I have developed from my own experiences.

I am an Isan¹ native. I was born in a middle class family and as a result I had the opportunity for a good education. I did my first degree in Political Sciences at Thammasat University, the original institute of politics. This institute has the slogan 'I love Thammasat because Thammasat teaches me to love the people.' For this reason, I did not hesitate when I was offered a position as a community development worker in a remote village in the Isan region where I could work with underprivileged people.

I worked for Foster Parents Plan International (PLAN), one of the world's largest international, child-centred development organizations, which has branches in over 45 developing countries. The community where I worked was very poor and the villagers struggled with their livelihood on a daily basis. There were infrastructure scarcities with little water, electricity or roads. They lived on infertile land affected by drought, which yielded very little. They walked a long way to catch fish from small rivers or to collect mushrooms and insects from the forest. I lived and worked with them and tried to help them solve their problems.

I learned many things about how Isan people survived in difficult conditions. This was a major factor in my intellectual development. Even though I was born in this region, I had never came across these circumstances before. The more I worked with them, the more I realized that the villagers had a lot of potential. They could go a long way towards solving their problems by relying on their indigenous knowledge, even though they had to cope with such difficulties. I found that people had the capacity to develop if only they were given an opportunity. My five years in and out of the village taught me that the best way to understand these people's problems was to 'stand in their shoes' and experience them by

¹ The term Isan refers to both the people and the region of North-eastern Thailand

myself. I also realized I needed even more practical experience. If I wanted to understand their way of looking at life, I would have to adapt my thinking to match theirs.

This experience in the remote village inspired me to gain more formal knowledge which could be applied to practical methods for these people to use. I decided to continue my studies by taking an MA. in Community Development at Thammasat University. There, I spent one and half years of the two year program taking courses, including the subjects: Theories in Community Development, Management in Community Development and a Seminar Course in Community Development. The other six months I spent in field work in Roi-et Province, also a part of the Isan Region. My dissertation was on ‘The Evolution of a Community Development Organization: A Case Study of a Rice Mill² Cooperative. The cooperative I chose was in the Phonesai Sub-district of Roi-et Province and had a membership of 13 villages. Its activities were buying unhusked rice from its own members, milling the grain, putting it into sacks and selling it. This cooperative helped the farmers in this area to sell rice and make a good profit. Even though this cooperative was very successful for the villagers, there were frequent problems concerning its functioning, especially in the area of communication: the farmers did not understand how the committee worked. I concluded that this problem could be reduced if they had more meetings but I also discovered differences in other areas. The experiences identified in this case study needed more analysis so I could make suggestions for other cooperatives.

Since finishing my MA, I have been working as a lecturer at Mahasarakham University, which is located in the central part of Isan. I have also continued to work with rural communities. As a Lecturer in Community Development I have had many opportunities to formulate and supervise the field studies of my students. From their research, I gained a great quantity of field data, much of which I found helpful in my own areas of interest. I also participated in many research projects including ‘Civil Society and Participatory Planning at the Provincial Level’, ‘The Social Capital and Self- sufficient Economy in the Chi River Basin’, ‘The Factors of Civil Society at the Sub-district Level’, ‘A Study of the Slums of Maha Sarakham, and ‘The Conceptual System Management of Villagers for the Conservation of Community Forests in Thailand’.

² Rice mill is a machine for removing the husk for harvested rice

The experiences I had in these projects inspired me to seek more answers around the concept of civil society. The Thai practice of ‘civil society’ seemed to be different from the theory coming out of the West. Thai civil society was not horizontally organized, and it needed to work with the government sector at some level in order to achieve its objectives. It desired legitimacy for its activities. These attributes contrasted with the characteristics of civil society as defined in Western literature, which explained civil society as horizontally organized, and separated from the state and market (Rooy, 1998). I had questions about how civil society might be interpreted in rural communities. I participated in a number of seminars on local development projects and developed a proposal for an action research project to develop and refine these questions for this study. My focus was ‘Civil Society in the Chi River Basin in Northeast Thailand’ and employed participatory action research as the methodology. I believed that community development was a process and that participatory action research would be tool to empower the people in the area of my study. I could learn from them, they could learn from me, and we could both learn from the process.

When I did my field work in 2003 in the local communities, I felt as if I had travelled back to the time that I had spent working as an NGO community development worker in poor rural communities. I selected two communities in the Chi River Basin, and the villagers and I worked together through the PAR process. A number of problems in the two communities were solved through the working process, such as flooding, deforestation and chemical use in agriculture. We enhanced our knowledge and experiences from working together to deal with the villagers’ hardship. The research process and the outcomes of the project also were very useful for me to understand civil society in Thai rural communities. Although my research project is finished, I intend to continue with my ongoing research interest with people in the region in which I was born. I fully intend to work with them in order to improve their way of life.