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AKHA ZANGR

The Akha System of Sustainable Development and Its Conflicts with Thailand's Development Process

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ABSTRACT

This thesis assesses Akha “zangr” (“way of life”) as an indigenous system of development relevant to Akha development in the highlands of Thailand. It uses the principles of sustainable development studies, incorporating empowerment, gender, environment, health, education, justice, equality, poverty and participation as a framework for the assessment. This is the first study to examine Akha zangr as a system of sustainable development. It follows on from the description given by Alting von Geusau (1999) of Akha zangr as a “system for the sustainability and continuity of the Akha as a marginalised people”. It is an attempt to empower the Akha community by giving credit to their knowledge and system of development as a modern rather than traditional system relevant to the 21st century.

In Thailand there are nine ethnic groups officially recognised as indigenous to the highlands, each with a unique language and “zangr” based on strategies for survival and development in the highland environment. This thesis describes their common experiences of the Thai development process. Consequences include political and social exclusion from participation in the development process, their unjustified label as “problem makers” in Thai politics, and the inaccurate assessment of Mountain People as ignorant and backward. Disastrous impacts of foreign development in the highlands include deforestation, poverty, human rights abuses and a loss of cultural independence and knowledge for minority ethnic groups.

Thailand’s development process is examined based on increasing economic growth. Discussions focus on the industrialisation period initiated in the 1950’s until the present day that, on paper, closely follow trends in international development thought. Thailand’s policies of sustainable development have so far been ineffective in reducing environmental degradation from rapid economic growth and instead exclude local people from participating in the management of the environment. The assessment concludes that Thailand’s top-down national economic growth policies have failed to improve the quality of life for

the most disadvantaged people in Thai society and instead have caused massive environmental degradation, increased poverty, inequalities and the disempowerment of individuals and the community.

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ACRONYMS

ACT	Akha Churches in Thailand
AFFECT	Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand
AITT	Assembly of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of Thailand
BPP	Border Police Patrol
DAPA	Development and Agriculture Project for Akha
DPW	Department of Public Welfare
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
GRP	Gross Regional Product
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development, 1994, Cairo
IMPECT	The Inter Mountain Peoples' Education and Culture in Thailand Association
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOPH	Ministry of Public Health
MPCDE / SEAMP-HRI	Mountain People's Cultural and Development Educational / South East Asian Mountain Peoples' Highland Research Institute
NESDB	National Economic Social and Development Board
NFPP	National Family Planning Project
NGO	Non Government Organisation
OEPP	Office of Environmental Policy and Planning; Ministry of Science Technology and Environment
RFD	Royal Forest Department
TAT	Tourist Authority of Thailand
TDRI	Thailand Development Research Institute
TRI	Tribal Research Institute
UNDCP	United Nations Drug Control Program
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WHO	World Health Organisation