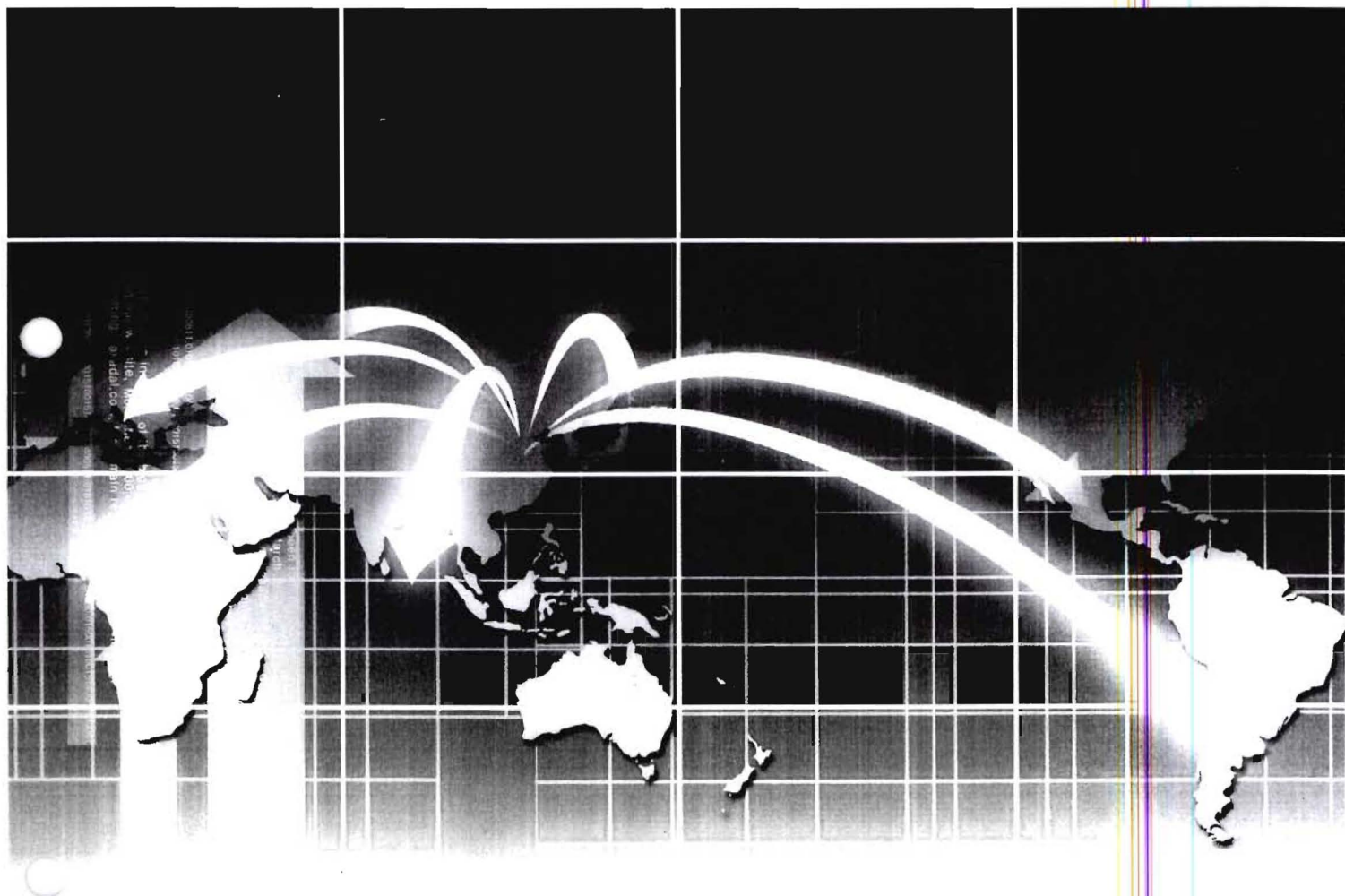




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POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND: THE ROLE OF LOCAL NGOs AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Theeraphong Bualar, PhD
 Community Management Field of Study
 School of Management Science,
 Silpakorn University,
 1 Sampraya Bypass Road, Cha Am Phetchaburi Thailand 76120
 Email: thiraphong@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article critically reviews the role of local NGOs and civil society in poverty alleviation and rural development in Thailand. The article argues that NGOs and civil society are facing difficulties in terms of foreign financial support. In Thailand, it is found that NGOs and civil society are not responsive to poverty alleviation and rural development because they do not have substantial impact upon their target groups. Donor-driven policy receives the most controversial criticism and this has led to goal displacement among local NGOs and civil society. Accountability has been replaced by accountancy. Local NGOs and civil society are entering into partnerships with multinational corporations to secure potential sources of financial aid. In addition, pressure from donors has encouraged local NGOs and civil society to expand their activities and accept contractual obligations. The article concludes that local NGOs and civil society in Thailand are not likely to be able to perform in line with national development plans because they continue to adhere to foreign funds.

Keywords: NGO; Civil Society; Poverty alleviation; Rural Development; Thailand

Introduction

Every nation needs to be prosperous for the wealth of the world. Over the last 20 years, a new development paradigm has emerged which addresses sustainability, participation, democracy, environment and community building. The United Nations (UN) celebrated the arrival of the 21st century by declaring Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which deal with eradication of poverty, achievement of primary education, promotion of gender equality and empowerment, child mortality reduction, maternal health improvement, HIV/AIDS and other disease control, environmental sustainability and global partnership for development.

These eight targets need to be addressed by every sector of society. In Thailand, both public and private organizations are important participants in propelling the country towards the success of poverty alleviation. The two major players in the development process are NGOs and civil society. However, very little research has been conducted regarding the roles of NGOs and civil society in supporting Thailand's poverty alleviation policies. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the role of the state, NGOs and their problems when concerned with poverty alleviation and rural development.

Thailand is a country currently undergoing rapid change. Originally a primarily agrarian society, it has evolved into an industrialized nation since the 1960s. Thailand was economically successful when compared with a number of its neighbours. The economic growth of the country has been accompanied by social ills, such as increasing numbers of poor people and rural-urban migration. The economic growth since the 1960s has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. Table 1 shows that the per capita monthly income of Bangkokians in 2009 is 27,318 Baht (853 USD), while the people of north-eastern regions of Thailand, which are the poorest areas, earned 3,805 Baht per month (119 USD).

Table 1: Per Capita monthly income by region: 2000 – 2009 (32 baht a dollar)

Year	Bangkok	Central	East	West	North	North-east	South
00	18,759	9,515	12,622	4,849	3,125	2,016	4,683
01	19,484	9,690	13,563	5,084	3,140	2,050	4,632
02	19,577	10,526	15,032	5,512	3,441	2,211	5,056
03	20,314	12,031	16,863	5,893	3,743	2,411	5,554
04	21,870	13,135	18,626	6,357	3,979	2,575	6,241
05	23,317	14,043	21,468	6,883	4,312	2,680	6,704
06	24,121	15,565	24,644	7,632	4,848	3,013	7,497
07	26,345	17,143	27,405	8,103	5,243	3,347	7,725
08	27,277	20,108	27,733	8,821	5,814	3,581	8,229
09	27,318	19,145	25,651	9,029	5,925	3,805	7,977

Source: The Household Socio-economic Survey, National Statistics Office, 2010.

Economic growth affects the wealth of nations and the human capital in Thailand. Until the economic crisis in 1997, Thailand had an impressive record in reducing the proportion of the population below the poverty line. After the crisis, the number of poor increased to 3 million people [1]. These phenomena forced the government of Thailand to rethink poverty alleviation policies both nationally and internationally. Based on a lot of research into poverty, Thailand realized that empowerment was a major factor involved in the solution. Research in Thailand reveals that poverty occurs in remote, rural areas as well as obvious urban slums. It highlights the existence of abject poverty among certain groups of people at times of high economic decline. These factors catalyze new methods and methodology to identify the poor.

Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Plan: Revisiting 1-9

The National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) implemented in 1961 is a comprehensive Thai plan emphasizing economic and social development, which influences the wealth of nations, and poverty alleviation programs. Thailand has now implemented its tenth plan. In this article, I will briefly discuss poverty alleviation and rural development policies in the NESDP from plan 1 to plan 9, with special emphasis on the ninth plan. Since the tenth plan is still undergoing and will be over in 2011, it is therefore too early to give comments in this article.

NEDP 1 (1961-1966). The first plan was a National Economic Development Plan aiming to increase income per capita by 3% per year. The national policies during this period were to strongly promote private sector activities. The government improved the essential infrastructure to support economic activities such as irrigation projects, transport services, agriculture promotion and healthcare.

NESDP 2 (1967-1971). The second plan put "social factors" into the development policy. This plan emphasized social development in line with economic development, human capital development by education, industrialization sectors, commercialization sectors, service sectors and rural development.

NESDP 3 (1972-1976). The third plan encouraged the public and private sectors to use natural resources as raw materials to produce both public and private goods. The aim of this plan was to export goods for sale. The national policies were to encourage agrarian, export and import-substitution industries.

NESDP 4 (1977-1981). Since NESDP 1-3 were affected by military politics, political turmoil and student demonstration in 1973 and 1976, the economic growth of the nation deteriorated. The

fourth plan, therefore, set up a national agenda for development by aiming to ensure social equity, stabilize national economics, and solve the fundamental economic problems in the long run.

NESDP 5 (1982-1986). The fifth plan was implemented in line with the fourth plan. It focused on economic structure improvement, the balance between economic growth and social development, and the alleviation of poverty, along with national security and cooperation between the government and private sectors.

NESDP 6 (1987-1991). The sixth plan was formulated and implemented during a world economic crisis. The economic growth of the country was less than 4% per year. Therefore, this plan attempted to deal with two different factors: economically, to maintain economic growth greater or equal to 5% per year for labour markets, and socially, to develop human capital for community development, social equity, and national culture and identity.

NESDP 7 (1992-1996). The sixth plan was successful. It maintained economic growth at 10.5% per year which was beyond expectations. This plan was to continuously maintain economic growth, and distribute income and development to regions and rural areas. Thailand's economy during this plan was booming.

NESDP 8 (1997-2001). This plan was concerned with human capital and focused upon that direction by aiming to develop human capabilities, protect the environment, improve people's quality of life, improve economic capacity, and promote the nation state's ideology. Unexpectedly, because of booming economy, financial sectors were spoiled by Bangkok International Banking Facilities (BIBF) resulting in massive non-performing loans. Finally, Thailand was hit by a financial crisis, so the government made a deal with the IMF which made the eighth plan pointless because the government had implemented the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).

NESDP 9 (2002-2006). Since Thailand hit an economic crisis during the eighth plan, the government had a rethink about economic and social development strategies. The ninth plan adopted the philosophy of a sufficiency economy as the guiding principles of national development and management. The objectives of this plan were firstly to promote economic stability and sustainability, including measures taken to strengthen the financial sector and fiscal position of the country, and secondly, to improve the chances of Thai people to meet the challenges of globalization and other changes. Thirdly, to enrich good governance at all levels in Thai society, based on the principles of efficiency, transparency and accountability. Lastly, to implement a reduction of poverty and the empowerment of Thai people

through equal access to education and social services. Employment was supported, leading to income generation. These economic measures were undertaken together with the encouragement of enabling empowerment of poor people. The target was to reduce absolute poverty to less than 12% of the total population by 2006 and the government was successful in this plan [1].

The NESDB has reinstated poverty alleviation as a major focus of its efforts under the ninth plan and has placed an emphasis on developing poverty alleviation strategies based on community empowerment experiences. Plans to tackle poverty must take into account the considerable amounts of experience from projects of community empowerment over recent years. Poverty policies should endeavour to build on social capital investments and community strengths and the importance of improving access to land and other natural resources as a key strategy of poverty alleviation, particularly with regard to life expectancy and rates of literacy [2, p.24].

It can be concluded that community empowerment and social capital investment are key factors of poverty alleviation strategies. It is obvious that the government and market mechanisms have failed to equally distribute income and public goods to the poor, resulting in so-called government failure and market failure. Apparently, empowerment of the community and investment in social capital is not only done by the government but also by NGOs and civil society. During the past three decades, NGOs and civil society have appeared and become stronger – especially in poverty alleviation and rural development sectors.

NGOs and Civil society in Thailand from early 20th century

Since the early 1970s, the government of Thailand has recognized that NGOs and civil society have played a pivotal role in poverty alleviation programs and rural development projects. The established NGOs and civil society have remained welfare-oriented groups. In this section, I, therefore, examined NGOs by looking at the theory implications, fund raising and financial support, and the accountability of NGOs.

History from the beginning

The first NGO in Thailand dates back to the 1800s when a group of elite ladies, led by Her Majesty the Queen of Thailand, established the Thai Red Cross in 1885, to perform philanthropic works such as dealing with wounded soldiers or provision of medical supplies. However, Thailand encountered political chaos on a regular basis until it became a

Constitutional Monarchy in 1932. Even since then, Political unrest has often been in evidence. Skinner observed that philanthropic organizations during the democratization period were stealthily created to provide help and shelter to protect certain groups of minority people [3, pp.165-167]. Since 1956, the number of philanthropic organizations has mushroomed. In 1961, the first National Economic Plan was formulated and implemented by the military rulers. The plan affected people in various socio-economic groups. In this period, business associations and organizations were formed to increase business bargaining powers with the military-ruled government. After the defeat of the military government in 1973, the victory of the university students' demonstration epitomized the blossoming of democracy. NGOs and civic participation were far stronger because the founders were mostly social elitists.

Salamon and Anheir discovered that the patterns of NGOs were influenced by three factors [4]. (i) Legal factors. Countries will define the roles of NGOs. NGOs are basically free to do social works as defined by related laws. (ii) Development factors. It appears that as economic growth proceeds, the social roles of middle class people become more prominent. Middle class professionals play an important role in creating NGOs and civil society in rural areas. (iii) Degree of decentralization. The structures of NGOs and civil society are adversely affected by centralization. Hence, the more decentralization, the stronger these organizations become.

Types of NGO, Fund Raising and Financial Support

A look at the historical development of NGOs shows that the shift from a policy of control to a policy of support can be seen clearly. Pongsapich found that the government had adopted a more liberal policy toward NGOs and let the NGOs play the role of monitoring agencies [5]. Legally, NGOs are categorized into two groups: registered and non-registered NGOs. Categories divided by legality are extremely narrow; therefore, in this article, NGOs are divided into eleven types based on their activity. Table 2 reveals that in 2003, the Social Works and Services category had the most registered NGOs, with 1,938 registrations, while the International Affairs category had the least number, with twelve registered NGOs [6].

Since NGOs play a crucial role in society, every category of NGO needs money for their activities; hence, their expenditure is really affected by both local and national events. Social Works and Services, Culture and Recreation and Education

and Research are the top three spenders. See Table 3.

Table 2: Number of NGOs in Thailand classified by activity in 2003

Activity	Registered	(%)	Non-registered	(%)
1.Social Works and Services	1,938	22.79	70	13.99
2.Culture and Recreation	1,870	22.25	12	2.39
3.Education and Research	1,140	13.56	28	5.63
4.Religions	942	11.21	5	1
5.Business Associations and Professionals	885	10.53	2	0.40
6.Human Rights, Civic Participation and Politics	612	7.29	68	13.67
7.Philanthropy	411	4.89	10	2.01
8.Public Health and AIDS	286	3.4	145	29.14
9.Housing, Urban and Rural Development	224	2066	100	20.02
10.Environment	86	1.02	50	9.94
11.International Affairs	12	0.14	7	1.41
Total	8,406	100	497	100

Source: Non-Profit Organizations in Thailand, Social Research Institute Chulalongkorn University, 2003.

Table 3: The Expenditures of NGOs classified by activities (32 Baht a dollar)

Activity	Registered	Expenditures (US dollars)
1.Social Works and Services	1,938	99,130,536
2.Cultural and Recreation	1,870	64,602,150
3.Education and Research	1,140	45,127,879
4.Business Associations and Professionals	885	36,700,507
5.Religions	942	31,985,850
6.Public Health and AIDS	286	26,948,350
7.Human Rights, Civic Participation and Politics	612	24,247,629
8.Housing, Urban and Rural Development	224	20,725,420
9.Philanthropy	411	16,740,146
10.Environment	86	9,149,755
11.International Affairs	12	423,238
Total	8,406	375,781,460

Source: Non-Profit Organizations in Thailand, Social Research Institute Chulalongkorn University, 2003.

Table 3 shows that the expenditures of NGOs are extremely high. The average expenditure of all NGOs is between 375 – 800 billion US dollars [6]. The question that arises is where these NGOs find these levels of budget. Traditionally, the sources of budget for NGOs, especially local NGOs are based on foreign funds. The Thailand Development Research Institution Foundation (TDRI) discovered

that local NGOs rely heavily on foreign capital and 70% of their cash flow is funded from abroad [7, pp.9-12]. There is some truth in this assumption. In many developing countries, the current foreign aid industry has greatly enlarged the size and numbers of local NGO communities [8, p.62]. However, economically, foreign funds seem to gradually decline and are likely to cut their budget for NGO activities in Thailand. For this reason, NGOs in Thailand have begun to bid for finance from within national sources such as government funds and private sector donations. In terms of government support, local NGOs will not receive aid directly but will be funded via the Ministries concerned. For example, AIDS NGOs will be funded by the Ministry of Public Health or Ministry of Interior. Furthermore, local NGOs which need to be funded by the government will be asked to submit project proposals in line with government policy. Some local NGOs, therefore, are not qualified to acquire funds from the government because their missions and purposes are not relevant to national policies.

MDGs and Poverty Alleviation: How government incorporates NGOs and civil society

In September 2000 at the Millennium Summit in New York, USA, the 189 members of the UN declared the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs committing themselves to achieve these targets by 2015. The eight goals were established by country members. The goals were categorized as follows: (i) eradicate poverty and hunger, (ii) achieve universal primary education, (iii) promote gender equality and empower women, (iv) reduce child mortality, (v) improve maternal health, (vi) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (vii) ensure environment sustainability and (viii) develop a global partnership for development. Since then, the individual countries have prepared their own MDGs strategies.

Thailand established targets in line with the MDGs. Thailand's MDG reports and Table 4 demonstrates that poverty in Thailand has already been reduced by two-thirds since 1990. The proportion of underweight children has fallen by nearly half. The access to primary education is likely to be achieved within a few years. HIV/AIDS and gender equality are heading in the right direction [9]. This success can be achieved with a mix of national harmony, policy-making and NGOs.

Table 4: Thailand Scorecard on MDG targets

Goals	Scorecard	Remarks
Poverty alleviation	Already achieved	Poverty reduced to 9.8% in 2002 Proportion of population under poverty line dropped to 2.2% in 2002
Access to primary school	Highly likely	Gross enrolment ratio and retention rates are high
Gender Equality	Already achieved	Boys and Girls have equal opportunities in education.
Reduce Child Mortality	Not Applicable	Given the low starting point in 1990 the target is not applicable
Improve Maternal Health	Not Applicable	Given the low starting point in 1990 the target is not applicable
AIDS and other diseases	Already achieved	Yearly new infections have dropped by over 80% since 1991, yet young people continue to be vulnerable.
Sustainable Development	Potentially	The loss of environmental resources is still challenging

Source: Thailand Millennium Development Goals Report 2004, NESDB.

The State incorporates NGOs and civil society into MDGs: Case studies of Poverty alleviation Projects and Environmental Affairs

Apparently, it is the government's policy to let people voice their concerns about environmental and developmental projects, and poverty alleviation projects. In particular, local NGOs and civil society are good driving forces for local people to exercise their involvement so that they can learn to play a greater role in the context of development. By taking part, NGOs and civil society must also learn how to participate [10]. Increased recognition of NGOs and civil society in rural development and poverty alleviation led to their inclusion in the National Economic and Social Development Plan Statement, from plan 6 onwards. Today, the government incorporates NGOs and civil society in many ways, such as (i) promoting private participation in education and health care development (ii) promoting private participation in AIDS campaigns, (iii) providing social welfare for the poor. Furthermore, during the formulation of the eighth NESDP, NGOs and civil society were significantly recognized as development driving forces by the government and international agencies. In the ninth Plan (2002-2006), the role of NGOs and civil society involved key strategies in human potential and social protection. The government states in plan 9 those development partnerships with family-oriented institutions, religious organizations, schools, communities, non-governmental organizations, volunteer organizations and the mass media must be promoted.

On one hand, NGOs are very supportive, but on the other hand they sometimes end up with different trajectories of development because the power over development decision-making processes occupied by the government is now shared by NGOs and civic participation [11, p.6]. This means that the role of the government gradually becomes smaller and smaller which can be seen from development and poverty alleviation projects such as the Pak Moon Dam, the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam dispute and the Thai-Malaysian Gas Pipeline Fuels project.

Burekul explored the roles of NGOs, civic groups and the government and she found that rock salt mining development projects, export-oriented prawn farming and tourism development in many parts of Thailand led to a politically strained relationship between the government and local NGOs and civil society [12].

With regard to the Pak Moon Dam dispute, local NGOs and civil society in the irrigation areas kept pressure on the government. The government tried to convince local people but the local NGOs provided pieces of information on the dark side of the dam. The government therefore retaliated by prolonging its final answer and showing incomprehensible data. As a form of retaliation, the opposing local NGOs laid down on the road outside the Government House [13].

In the case of the Gas Pipeline project, a long overdue Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline project was hit by fresh opposition from local environmental NGOs and civil society despite an attempt by the government to soothe its critics by rerouting it. The opposing NGOs, however, blocked any effort to construct the line by being on a round-the-clock security alert. Finally, it ended up with a government crackdown on 20th of December 2002 [14].

The examples shown above indicate that there is a resurgence of interest in the idea of NGOs. The pressures and movements for NGOs and other non-state actors in the government's development projects; however, almost always result in insurgency in the community rather than the government [15]. The public input made by NGOs and civil society is likely to be exercised after the government has already defined the development projects. For this reason, this article attempts to raise questions about the roles of NGOs and civil society.

Remarks on Thai NGOs and civil society's attempts to reach MDGs: Weaknesses and Threats

Much evidence in recent years suggests that NGOs are not effective in poverty alleviation and rural development. NGOs have failed to substantiate impacts on the target groups. Some NGOs, in a headlong rush for growth, influence and status, seem to have forgotten that voluntarism and values are the most precious assets [16, p.15]. Therefore, this section examines the failures of NGOs.

First, the most controversial criticism that bombards local NGOs and civil society is about donor-driven policies. Zaidi suggested that the explosion in NGOs and other non-state actors in recent years is entirely donor-driven, and that the spending spree launched by donors gave birth to literally thousands of NGOs and civil society in a matter of two or three years [17, p.209]. Accountability has been replaced by accountancy. Obviously, NGOs and civil society are entering into partnerships with Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) for their potential sources of income [18, p.327]. Two important things that NGOs and civil society must be aware of regarding donated funds are the unpredictability and the tenure of fund availability. If they fail to abide by the donor requirements or criteria, money could be delayed, retrenched, or totally halted which will certainly affect their projects and functions. If donors change their policies to support other area of interests, NGOs and civil society would probably cease to exist. For this reason, local NGOs seem more intent on satisfying donors, rather than poor people, to ensure the continuity of funds and foreign aid for their existence. NGOs and civil society in Thailand are facing the same problems. Thai NGOs and civil society are now forming partnerships with the private sector aiming to gain funding from big companies.

Second, goal 'displacements' are obvious among Thai NGOs and civil society. In some situations, some local NGOs perceive themselves only as activists in the pursuit of goals. For this reason, there is little or no dialogue between local NGOs and the situation results in a conflict of interests. An example of this situation was CITES in Bangkok 2004 when two groups of local NGOs had a conflict of interests and the situation ended in violence with the opposing NGOs. Another point of goal displacement concerns delivery of service to the poor. The problem is that local NGOs and civil society cannot identify who the poor really are and cannot reach the poorest people, simply because they have to satisfy the donors and report the success (or failures) of the projects to them. Hailey argued that pressure from donors has

encouraged local NGOs and civil society to expand their activities and accept contractual obligations far removed from their original ideals [19, pp.402-407]. This shows that the orientation of the accountability towards donors and away from the poor or grass-roots people is a particular threat to local NGOs and local non-state actors [20, p.442] [21, p.509].

The weaknesses and threats of NGOs discussed above demonstrate that local NGOs are not likely to be able to perform in line with the national MDGs for poverty alleviation because most local NGOs rely on foreign funds so they are controlled by donor driven policies, and not national MDG-driven policies. They could even antagonize MDG policies, as in the case of the CITES conflict of interest situation, and poverty alleviation projects, such as the aforementioned dam or gas pipeline projects.

Conclusion

Although local NGOs and civil society are in trouble in terms of foreign financial support, they still have ways forward because of their strengths and opportunities. Local NGOs and civil society are at least aiming for human approaches to development. If they recognize their social capital, they can continue to exist. The best aspect of local NGOs and civil society is their action through the networks and forums in which they participate. Their strength lies in their involvement with very local people in a vast network, or as a social fabric. Moreover, the most reliable information available to most NGOs remains local knowledge and understanding of their local counterparts. The government of Thailand recognizes the role of NGOs and civil society, as is evident from the statement in NESDP 9. Furthermore, the 2007 Constitution of Thailand promulgates civic rights and NGOs, which appear in many chapters of the Constitution.

Now Thailand has a clear-cut policy regarding Millennium Development Goals which must be achieved by 2015. The targets are derived from a United Nations Conference in 2000 in New York, USA. The targets are concerned with poverty alleviation, rural development, and a better quality of life. However, to realize the attainment of poverty alleviation and rural development projects needs cooperation between Thai people and institutions. To achieve MDGs is a Herculean task for the government of Thailand and non-state actors. Furthermore, globalization still plays a crucial role in World development and affects financial capital. This means that the government of Thailand, local NGOs and civil society must keep a close watch on the situation, which is still

vulnerable to financial crises. If Thailand hits a financial crisis again, the dreams of attaining MDGs and poverty alleviation will be destroyed.

For this reason, the State really should incorporate NGOs and civil society. The state cannot be the only player in development work. The ability to reach MDGs and poverty alleviation will depend on whether the government, NGOs and civil society are accountable to common goals or not. As a reminder to the government and NGOs and civil society, without comprehensive cooperation, poverty alleviation and rural development projects will grind to a complete halt.

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