

Introduction

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シリーズタイトル(英)	Occasional Papers Series
シリーズ番号	35
journal or publication title	Cooperation and Community in Rural Thailand : An Organizational Analysis of Participatory Rural Development
page range	1-6
year	1998
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2344/00010675

Introduction

Since the early 1960s Thailand has experienced rapid economic growth averaging over 7 per cent annually. Prompted by this rapid growth the market economy has begun to penetrate throughout the country's rural areas where a considerable degree of self-sufficiency had remained. For a villager to clear a piece of forest land and take it over for farming had once been a widespread practice, but during the past thirty to forty years it has become very difficult to find forest land to clear, even in the underdeveloped Northeast because of the massive cutting of forests by villagers in search of new farmland and by developers involved in the logging business. This in turn has reduced the availability of natural forest products which villagers have always freely gathered and now which they have to purchase in the marketplace.

The country's labor force likewise has been affected. The agricultural wage labor market has been spreading since the 1960s. It now reaches even into rural areas outside of the economically advanced zones like the central delta, and a highly visible movement of migrant workers to Bangkok has developed (Goldstein and Goldstein 1986). Markets for agricultural products connecting directly with Bangkok and the rest of the world have come into existence throughout the country and now penetrate down to each village. The ratio for the commercialization of rice, Thailand's staple food, even in the Northeast where production for household consumption has taken priority, rose from less than 20 per cent at the beginning of the 1960s to nearly 50 per cent at the end of the 1980s (Shigetomi 1996a, p.46). Along with rice other commercial

crops destined for overseas markets have come to be cultivated throughout the country since the 1970s. Through this process it has become possible for villagers, even for those living in the same village, to earn a living separately and individually through transacting business with the outside market. Likewise mutual relationships have become market-like monetary and service relationships replacing the villagers' previous reciprocal relationships. This is not to say that Thai villagers had no relationship with the market in the past. But the changes since the 1960s have rapidly diluted these reciprocal relationships or have placed villagers into competitive relationships.

A noteworthy point within all of this change is that since the latter half of the 1970s one can see cases of cooperation in the economic sphere among villagers through the formation of new organizations and the initiation of organizational activities. One such example is the formation of savings groups where money from the savings accumulated by these groups has been lent at low interest to members with insufficient funds. Another example has been the organizing of rice banks where farmers contribute little by little to the accumulation of paddy which is lent out at low interest to villagers with insufficient rice. These organizations are examples of the countermeasures that villagers have been taking to counteract the growing burden of high interest debts in money and rice which has accompanied the penetration of the market economy. In other words, these are villager organizations that have come into existence for promoting the economic development of the villagers. A large volume of literature about these villager organizations has been produced by scholars and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who have been supporting the activities of such organizations. This literature has employed the concept of "community culture," and this has become the key word for describing the behavioral principle of villagers (Seri 1989a).

These types of organizational activities among villagers have had a great impact on Thai rural studies, although there are also researchers who see little significance in these villager activities. They argue that such activities have come about as a result of strong external (government and NGO) start-up efforts and are only a passing phenomenon; and while there are successful examples that can be pointed to, these have been achieved only because an outstanding leader happened to be present. But such a negative view of these cooperative activities leaves these researchers unable to explain developments that have taken place.

Certainly there have been many cases where savings groups and rice banks have been organized due to the efforts of outside groups. But where these organizations continue to be active over a certain length of time, it becomes impossible to attribute it solely to the leadership of outside groups. Particu-

larly for organizations set up under the guidance of the government, their further operations are most often left to the villagers, and even in these cases there are many that continue to operate for a good period of time, some having existed for a decade and longer and which continue to provide economic benefits to the villagers. Such examples would certainly be impossible if it were not for the autonomous efforts of the villagers themselves. Moreover villagers have formed funeral associations amongst themselves without the assistance of outside groups, and also they can be seen acting cooperatively in the use and maintenance of land and forests. One example is the forest that the villagers cooperatively use and which can be found in the vicinity of the village. It is called the "community forest," and the important role that this forest plays in rural life and in the conservation of environment has now been acknowledged by the government. Laws are being prepared to grant to the village community some degree of authority over this forest. Seeing these sorts of activities, one has to think that villagers have capabilities of organizing themselves on their own.

There are already a number of studies that have delved into Thai villager organizational activities, but for the most part these have simply presented the successful examples, have presented an image of what the village ought to be, and then pushed a social movement agenda to realize this image, or have been largely assertions with little supporting evidence that these activities are the banding together of the weak who have become the victims of capitalistic economic development. In effect the villagers' organizing activities have been beautified and idealized, or they have simply been disregarded; they have not been the subject of well-grounded objective analysis.

The present work differs from these previous studies in that it sets forth and seeks to examine the following issues. Firstly, it seeks to clarify the form and characteristics of organized activities like those noted above. If these activities show a new form of organization and cooperativeness among villagers, we need to clarify in what sense they can be regarded as new. Cooperative and organized activities have long been practiced among Thai villagers. But in comparison with this traditional cooperation and organization, we need to examine the characteristics of the cooperative and organized activities that are now extensively taking place among villagers.

Secondly, we need to clarify why this sort of organizational change is taking place, and why a new type of cooperation has become possible. Certainly villagers make a conscious effort to adopt organized activities because there must be some economic necessity and benefit in it. However, organized activities among villagers are not brought about solely by nor do they succeed solely because of economic factors. Whether an organized activity will be

successful or not depends on whether people can be cognitively successful at coordinating their mutual actions within the organization. And ultimately people's mutual actions are determined by the social relationships existing in the place where they live. Thus the characteristics of villager organizations will be determined by the social relationships of the villagers and the changes that take place in these relationships.

When the issue is presented in this way, it is evident that past research on rural Thai society has not sufficiently explained the social conditions that bring about new forms of organization. The prevailing sociological image of rural Thai society is that of a "loosely structured society." For example it has been said that voluntarily organized associations do not exist in the Thai village, that Thai society in general has an "exceptionally amorphous, relatively unstructured character," and that the society has only an "undifferentiated social organization" (Sharp et al. 1953, pp. 26, 28). It has also been said that in the Thai village there is no social organization or even community having a group-like structure (Kemp 1988, p. 20; 1989, p. 15). To scholars who take such a view of Thai society, one has to ask how they can account for the occurrence of such organized activities as the above-mentioned savings groups and cooperatively used forests or how it is that these have continued to function for the past twenty and more years. The existence of these new forms of organized activities does not fit in well with the prevailing image of rural Thai society, and it compels us to reconsider this image.

Likewise, the clarification of the forms that organized villager activities take and the mechanisms by which they come about has important implications for the theory and practice of rural development. Generally in developing countries it is the villagers that form the impoverished class of the country, and the improvement of their living conditions is a major policy issue. But relying only on the government activities and market mechanism to effectuate the transfer of resources cannot easily solve the problem of the economic disparity between urban and rural areas and within the rural areas themselves. Looking at Thailand, for example, despite the rapid economic growth since the 1960s, 70 per cent of the population in 1990 still lived in the countryside, and rural income was less than 50 per cent of that in the urban areas (NSO 1993, 1994).

When it became clear that economic development would not necessarily solve the problem of poverty, people began to advocate the importance of social development. The strategy advocated for this was villager "participation" (Midgley et al. 1986). In the late 1960s, UN General Assembly resolutions emphasized "active participation" (United Nations 1975, pp. 1-2), and thereafter a large amount of literature was published about "participatory de-

velopment.” This literature advocates that by having villager participation in the decision-making process of development projects, (1) the projects will be more effective because they will be in line with the villagers’ requirements, (2) the villagers’ resources and know-how will be mobilized which will economize on the input of external resources, (3) a spirit and capability of self-reliance will be fostered based on the needs of the villagers for them to carry on operations themselves and for the sustainability of development, and (4) through their involvement in the development process, the villagers will acquire empowerment (Oakley et al. 1991, pp. 17–18).

However, it should be emphasized that, in order to achieve participatory development with all of its merits, the precondition indispensable for this process is the existence of villager organization. This is because for villagers to participate in the decision making of a development project, they first have to be organized; thereafter the implementation of the project will likewise require that they be organized. In sum, villager organization becomes the determinant for the success or failure of participatory development. But it is something that is not easily put into practice in the villages of developing countries. Rather it can be said that in developing countries the efforts to organize village people have often ended in failure.

To pick a few examples of such failures, in some Korean villages cement from the government that was intended for cooperative use in the villages was instead passed out to individuals and ultimately resold (Yogo forthcoming). In Bangladesh savings groups were set up, but some of them soon collapsed because the leaders appropriated the accumulated funds for their own private use (Kaida et al. 1996, p. 114). Or the problem in Thailand of savings group members not repaying the funds they have borrowed which has led to the collapse of the group (see Chapter 2). What is common to all such cases is the presence of problems in the system directing people’s actions in cooperative endeavors. One may argue that when organizing villagers one can count on a cooperativeness that is regarded as customary among villagers in the traditional economy. But this is not the case. It is extremely difficult to organize people’s cooperative activities in new ways in the villages of the developing countries where the penetration of the market economy is still shallow and significant elements of the traditional economy continue to exist.

For there to be participatory rural development, clearly there has to be organization among the villagers. And although this organizing has major problems that need to be solved, the accumulation of research dealing with these problems remains insufficient (Cernea 1987). Among economists, for example, there are people who have analyzed these problems from the standpoint of the economics of internal organizations, but the intent of their re-

search has been to elucidate the sorts of economic environments where it becomes advantageous for villagers to utilize organizational methods (in place of the market). But throughout their research these economists premise their arguments on the abstraction of a villager whose actions are always economically rational, and for this reason they never talk about how villagers as actual people really act when organizing (Hoff, Braverman, and Stiglitz 1993; Wade 1988; Chopra et al. 1990). The analysis of villager organization has also been approached using sociological methodologies, but most of these studies have dealt only with organizational forms or types or with how organizations are operated (Schiller 1971; FAO 1979; Bratton 1986). Among these the work by Esman and Uphoff (1984) is the only research known to this author that has made a comprehensive analysis of the factors that bring about successful villager organizations. These two researchers built up indicators of organizational performance and the factors for this performance, and based on these indicators they computed the coefficients of correlation for 150 cases of organized activity in forty-eight countries. However, what their method measured was not the relationship among the factors of each organization, but the correlation of the factors in the total number of cases calculated. This method will not tell us about the relationship between the social environment surrounding an organization and the factors determining the performance of that organization.

But when actually trying to direct villagers toward an organized activity, the information that is needed is knowing what factors are linked to desirable organized activity in what kind of society. This is because the people who form and carry on organized activities are members of a society, and as such their actions are determined by social relationships, social organizations, and social systems. Thus for us to theorize on the organization of villagers for the purpose of development requires that we have a structural understanding of the factors in the social environment that determine the formation of individual organizations. The next step for advancing our theorizing is to typologize the relationships between the social environment, factors for organizing, and the performance of organizations. The present study has been undertaken as one step towards this end. Through an examination of the characteristics of organizations that are found in the Thai village and the mechanisms that form these organizations, this work will explore the structural characteristics of rural Thai society and at the same time will seek to present the theoretical and policy implications related to the organizing of villagers for the purpose of participatory development.