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The Power to Change: Rebuilding Sustainable Livelihoods in North-East Thailand

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Abstract: *This paper describes how a cluster of rural communities in North-East Thailand has managed to reverse more than two decades of environmental degradation that had resulted from the relentless pursuit of modern economic development, resource exploitation and ecosystem transformation. This process of 'clawing back' local control over local development, following a period of 'crowding out' by extra-local agencies and actors, is set against a back-drop of shifts in the locus and balance of what Dowding (1996, 4) has called 'outcome power' or an enabling 'power to'. The paper identifies the key actors and factors that lie behind this 'power shift', and sets these against a background of democratisation processes and localist discourse in post-crisis Thailand.*

Key words: Thailand, localism, Buddhism, power, civil society, crowding out.

1. Power and Contestation

Power is not a given, it has to be gained and maintained (Law 1991, p. 18). Power is associational, and thus rests on relations of power and their social and political underpinnings (Sneddon, 2003 p. 2232). Foucault (1980) finds power everywhere, but relations of power are asymmetrical (Slater 2002, p. 258). This asymmetry may, in part, be path dependent, in that the historical construction of systems, institutions and discourses has given certain classes, groups, interests and ideologies a privileged position over others, but the acquisition and exercise of power are in constant flux, the result of simultaneous processes of consolidation and contestation.

Historical analyses of power have tended to focus on power as domination, or what Law (1991, p. 165) refers to as 'power over', and have emphasised state power as the critical nexus of domination and subor-

dination in power relations. Likewise, Crush (1995, p. 7; following Said, 1978), argues that "power in the context of development is power *exercised*, power *over*" [emphasis in original]. However, following Foucault's (1980; 1982) more ethereal and ephemeral vision of power as ubiquitous, transitory, shifting, seeping, unstable, contingent and ambivalent (see also Butler 1997), more recent analysis has tended to shift away from the production and manifestation of hegemonic power and towards deconstructive acts that disassemble, fragment and resist (Rose 2002, p. 383) acts which may change the balance of power and enhance what Dowding (1996, p. 4) calls 'outcome power' or an enabling 'power to'.

"...power is a more or less stable or shifting network of alliances extended over a shifting terrain of practice and discursively constituted interest. Points of resistance

will open up at many points in the network whose effect will be to fracture alliances, constitute regroupings and re-posit strategies.” (Foucault 1984, pp. 95-6).

How does the collective contestation of the balance of power come about and manifest itself? Who are the principal actors in any ‘power shift’? What are the implications of shifts in ‘power over’ (conflictual domination) for people’s (co-operative or enabling) ‘power to’ influence and control, in the present context, their own developmental and environmental destinies? How do the structures and institutions of the established order respond when faced with challenges to the balance of power? These are questions that this paper will address, principally by means of a case study from North-East Thailand. We are interested here in ‘power to’ control the process of development and thus influence its environmental consequences.

Resistance and contestation occur through the intentional and strategic subversion by everyday actors of hegemonic practices, relations and discourses (Rose 2002, p. 383), the aim being empowerment and the assertion of alternative networks of influence. However, “separate movements of resistance will have less potential to challenge [power] whereas the articulation and association of different social struggles [e.g.] through a project to deepen and extend democracy can offer a broader and more emancipatory alternative” (Slater 2002, p. 261). In other words, ubiquitous local, ephemeral and particular struggles may be important in relation to local, ephemeral and particular hegemonic practices, and may collectively constitute a form of ‘ascending power’ (ibid., p. 262), but they seem inherently unlikely to build into a movement of collective action which may challenge the overarching structures and webs of power against which micro-struggles are directed. What is needed is a movement which, whilst ideally building from the grassroots upwards, has the muscle to contest hegemonic power structures at the top and the centre. Paradoxically, a shift in the balance of power that has an extra-local epicentre may have limited local relevance and value, leading, perhaps, to further phases of local contestation. What, then, is the appropriate mix of local and extra-local forces in the struggle for development and environment? To what extent does a power shift satisfy all prevailing needs and agendas: are some people excluded from the newly arrayed structures of power?

The Thai case study reflects in microcosm a series of swings, switches and movements that, superficially at least, has seen a shift in the balance of power in the country away from the centre to the periphery, from the top to the bottom, and from the state to the people. The power shift can be found in several forms: e.g. bureaucratic, discursive, political, moral. The following discussion will briefly map these shifting sands of Thai development politics.

The back-cloth to the case study – which describes how a cluster of rural communities has wrested control of local developmental and environmental processes from extra-local actors and institutions through a ‘moral community’ approach – is made up of several overlapping elements: e.g. democratisation, decentralisation, civil society, localist discourse, alternative development discourse, environmentalism, populism.

Democratisation has proceeded steadily in Thailand over the last 10-20 years. We are concerned here less with people’s capacity to acquire the power to influence and decide via the electoral system - which continues to be compromised by vote-buying and vested interests – and more with the building of a democratic civil society where independent social associations and institutions counter the power of the state and seek empowerment for themselves and their constituents (Somchai 2002, p. 126). Democratic political space has in part been prised open by a popular ‘struggle from below’, in which various activist groups have sought to promote an inclusive, just and transparent political agenda, often in direct opposition to the institutions and actors of authoritarian rule. Since the ousting of the country’s last military-imposed government in 1992, ‘democratisation from above’ in the shape of political reform, good governance and participatory decision-making has gained in momentum (ibid., p. 130), culminating in the promulgation of a new Constitution in 1997 which, according to Klein (1998, p. 4), has laid the platform “for transforming Thailand from a bureaucratic polity prone to abuse of citizen rights and corruption, to a participatory democracy in which citizens will have greater opportunities to chart their destiny.”

The new Constitution placed a heavy emphasis on decentralisation, and was quickly followed by the National Decentralisation Act, which became effec-

tive in November 1999. The Act built upon efforts starting in the early 1990s under the premiership of Chuan Leekpai to strengthen local government and give local authorities more power to formulate development projects (Arghiros 2002; Weist, 2001). This included the establishment in 1996 of Tambon [sub-district] Administrative Organisations (TAO) in rural areas which, according to Arghiros (2002, p. 229) “potentially function as genuine forums for local interests” and which, in theory at least, weaken the local power and influence of traditional village and sub-district heads who have historically been the principal, hegemonic point of linkage between the state and local rural populations. On the surface it also represents a fundamental weakening of central government decision-making control over local development – a far cry from the situation that prevailed little more than 30 years ago when national security concerns were used to justify the Ministry of Interior’s iron grip over provinces in the country’s periphery (Arghiros 2002, p. 226), as we shall see shortly. However, Arghiros claims (2002, p. 231) that the TAOs have been used by the Ministry of Interior less as a genuine device to facilitate the autonomy and empowerment of local communities and more as a means of extending its administrative reach into rural communities. There are thus two facets to the reform process in Thailand: one that is superficially democratic and empowering, and another that smacks of ‘business as usual’ rhetorically dressed up in emancipatory garb.

A small but significant schism has also appeared within Thailand’s flourishing civil society between, as Hedman (2001, pp. 930-1) notes, contestation of political structures and processes by a predominantly urban middle class, which has opened up considerable political space for the further development of liberal democracy, and the popular politics of the (especially rural) masses. Thus, with the exception of the post-1995 Assembly of the Poor, which consisted in large part of insecure peasant groups who were agitating for political action on both national- and local-level policies and activities that were adversely affecting their livelihoods (Baker 2000), and other more localised struggles, the process of political empowerment since 1992 has been strongly influenced by urban middle class activists and actors (Hedman 2001, p. 930). This point is significant in relation to another of the background elements of the case study, localism.

Localism emerged as an ideology and movement in the 1980s as a response to the developmental, environmental and cultural identity problems associated with over-rapid economic growth, spatial integration and globalisation. It then became a dominant discourse in Thailand in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis when people started to reflect on the appropriateness of the country’s development path, suggesting alternative models of development to take its place. It was claimed, most prominently by King Bhumibol Adulyadej in his ‘New Theory on the Sufficiency Economy’ (HM Bhumibol Adulyadej 1998), that decades of economic boom had weakened the country’s capacity for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. These qualities needed to be rediscovered and rebuilt if Thailand was to move back on a path towards a sustainable future. Localism – an inward-looking movement to re-establish a self-contained self-reliance within communities based on place-specific cultural, social, historical and ecological referents - was one answer to the country’s growing economic and environmental crisis, particularly in rural areas. Localist discourse was strongly critical of the mainstream development paradigm that was being aggressively promoted by state bureaucrats, with its rapacious use of natural resources, intense materialism, consumerism, commercialisation and privatisation, and its external market orientation. The popularisation of the localism concept by King Bhumibol led to self-reliance becoming the new mantra of politicians, planners and practitioners (UNDP, 2003). Localism centres on local attempts to assert greater control over local developmental, environmental and representational processes, often using a rooted cultural imagery (Reynolds 2001). At its heart is the notion of *watthanatham chumchon*, or community culture, that was popularised in the 1970s and 1980s by Thai intellectuals (e.g. Niphot Thianwihan, Chatthip Nartsupha, Saneh Chamarik, Prawase Wasi, Sulak Sivaraksa). The Thai case study in this paper is the epitome of localist philosophy and action.

The point here is that the driving force behind the localism movement in Thailand did not emanate entirely from the localities themselves. It was strongly influenced by urban, middle class intellectuals, social activists and other extra-local actors. Non-governmental organisations – an important manifestation of civil society in Thailand – also played an important role in converting localist discourse into local

action, working on behalf of local communities, especially when it came to political struggle and advocacy work (Preecha 1999). Many of the development NGOs that thrived during the opening up of political space during the premiership of Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-88) pursued an ideology of taking their work to localities, to villages (Callahan 1995, Preecha 1999). Many took with them a populist ideology of localism, their activities strongly influenced by alternative development thinking and environmentalism, their local development actions, informed by romantic stereotypes of 'the rural', displaying a strong 'back to the future' flavour which uses as its point of reference the often mythical 'golden era' of the past (Hewison 1999, 2000; Gohlert 1991). Thai Theravada Buddhism has frequently been used as the cultural referent for much localist thinking and action, where an antidote has to be found for the acquisitiveness of mainstream development. Principles of moderation, wise consumption, sufficiency and self-reliance lie at the heart of this doctrinal localism (Phongpaichit and Baker 2000). At the heart of the localism movement can often be found the 'moral community' built fundamentally on sound Buddhist principles and practice, as we shall see in the following case study.

As mentioned earlier, local development battles require the opening up of national political space if they are to be successfully fought, and this can rarely be accomplished from within the locality alone. Alliances must be forged with external interests and institutions, even if this results in a mismatch of agendas, a misunderstanding of objectives and a misrepresentation of interests. Thus, although Thailand has undoubtedly been 'moving in the right direction' as power has seeped from the top to the bottom, and from the state to the people, beneath this new political coat can be found flecks of the old paint, and there is often less than total agreement about the new colour scheme.

2. Power Shifts in North-East Thailand

The following case study uses qualitative data from a collaborative EU-funded research programme (INCO-DEV: ICA4-CT-2000-30013) which was concerned with the role and impact of social coping mechanisms in the face of economic and environmental shocks, stresses and challenges. The programme involved research in Thailand, Viet-

nam and the Lao PDR, and utilised a participatory methodology whereby members of selected study communities were able to influence the scope of the investigation in terms of focus, issues, priorities and outcomes. The methodology, briefly, involved rapid community appraisal, including transect walks, time lines, community stories and community mapping exercises; identification of stakeholders and key informants and the creation of a number of discussion groups and focus groups which sought to include the institutionally and socially excluded; regular processes of triangulation and participatory iteration, and the identification and exploration of emerging issues; case studies; on-site analysis, feedback meetings and the participatory authentication of research findings and interpretations; and the presentation of research reports to the study communities (on-going). The Thai component of the research programme (undertaken in conjunction with Dr. Wathana Wongsekiartirat and Dr. Suriya Veeravongs of the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute) involved field-work in three provinces in the country's peripheral regions, Chumphon in the South, Petchabun in the North and Yasothon in the North-East. The present study focuses on the Yasothon case.

Power in this case is operationalised as 'power to' and centres on the contestation of the mainstream model of development and the hegemonic political and bureaucratic structures that underpin it, and the assertion of control over both the definition and operationalisation of 'alternative' forms of development that have local culture, local interests and local ecosystems at their heart. Inasmuch as the social and environmental impacts of mainstream development have increasingly been seen as problematic by the corpus of people on whom the following case study focuses, and inasmuch as these outcomes are a reflection of the community's lack of control over its own developmental destiny, the wresting back of control through a series of collective moral, organisational and ideological initiatives is taken in this study to reflect a shift in the nexus of 'power to', or empowerment. The case study, as cited above, centres on a "shifting network of alliances extended over a shifting terrain of practice and discursively constituted interest" (Foucault 1984, p. 96).

To reveal processes of 'power shift', and to understand the developmental and environmental

implications, it is necessary to adopt an historically informed understanding of the dynamics of power at the confluence of the local and the extra-local (Crush 1995, Sneddon 2003). The case study thus takes the form of a historical story which maps out sequential phases of community control and self-reliance, its 'crowding out' by the imposition of state bureaucracy and hegemony (coupled with rapid integration to the national spatial-economy) in the process of setting and dominating the local development agenda, and more recently an on-going phase of 'clawing back' wherein the study community has successfully promoted an alternative development agenda based on sound ecological, social and moral principles. The case study identifies the key actors in each of these phases of development, and provides an insightful account that engages the questions and issues that were raised in the previous section: the roots of collective contestation; the principal drivers of a 'power shift'; the implications of the assertion of 'power to'; the response of the established order to a shift in the balance of power; the appropriate mix of local and extra-local actors; and the degree of exclusion from new structures of power. The discussion centres on the positive achievements of the study community in asserting control over its own developmental and environmental destiny, but remains mindful of some of the tensions and contradictions that are revealed along the way. The power dimensions of the case study are drawn together in a short concluding discussion at the end of the paper.

A brief synopsis of the case study will be helpful at this stage, before fleshing out some of the key points and sifting out the role of power in environmental change. In outline, the study is centred on a cluster of communities in the economically impoverished, ecologically marginal and geographically peripheral north-eastern region of Thailand. These communities appear to have experienced a seemingly circular history of balance, disequilibrium and re-balance, in both developmental and, particularly, environmental terms, as summarised in Figure 1 (which reads clockwise from '*isaan* culture' - *isaan* is the name given to the northeastern region of Thailand, and to the Thai-Lao people found therewithin). During a period that started roughly more than a century ago and ran through to the early 1970s, the satisfaction of livelihood needs appears to have exerted only a limited impact on the natural environment. Needs were relatively modest, development as a modern

project had hardly reached these communities, the means of environmental exploitation were fairly limited and, importantly, there was strong social cohesion built around charismatic traditional moral leaders, and which translated, in part, into effective local environmental regulation and mechanisms of social distribution. Power was in local hands and was used, by and large, for the common good. People looked out for one another, and a series of institutionalised social practices provided an effective safety net for a community that had occasionally to cope with ecological stresses such as droughts and floods, and personal shocks associated with death, illness, etc.

Significant changes started to occur from the early to mid 1970s as a result of a power shift that occurred on two related fronts. The growth of a communist-inspired regional separatist movement in the North-East, which included the study area, led to the Thai government asserting much more direct control than had been the case hitherto, including the stationing of a military corps in one of the study communities. At the same time, and partly because the resistance movement itself had been fed by a growing sense of relative development deprivation, the government greatly intensified its development interventions in the study area, paving the way for a rapid process of integration with the external market and the involvement of extra-local actors and agencies in local development. Indebtedness rose significantly during this period, as did the degree of dependence on the external economy. These processes of change also brought with them an intensifying environmental crisis, together with rising levels of social differentiation. The externalisation of the local economy, together with the assertion of hegemonic control by the Thai developmental state, contributed to the 'crowding out' (Morduch and Sharma 2002; Parnwell, 2005) of local institutions and practices, and underpinned a process of local disequilibrium.

At this point the story is, perhaps, fairly ordinary, having been repeated countless times the world over. But the interesting point centres on the second power shift which started in the 1980s and gained momentum during the 1990s when, inspired by the moral leadership of a key local individual, facilitated by various external civil society institutions, encouraged by a back-drop of democratisation and nurtured by a discourse of localism and appropri-

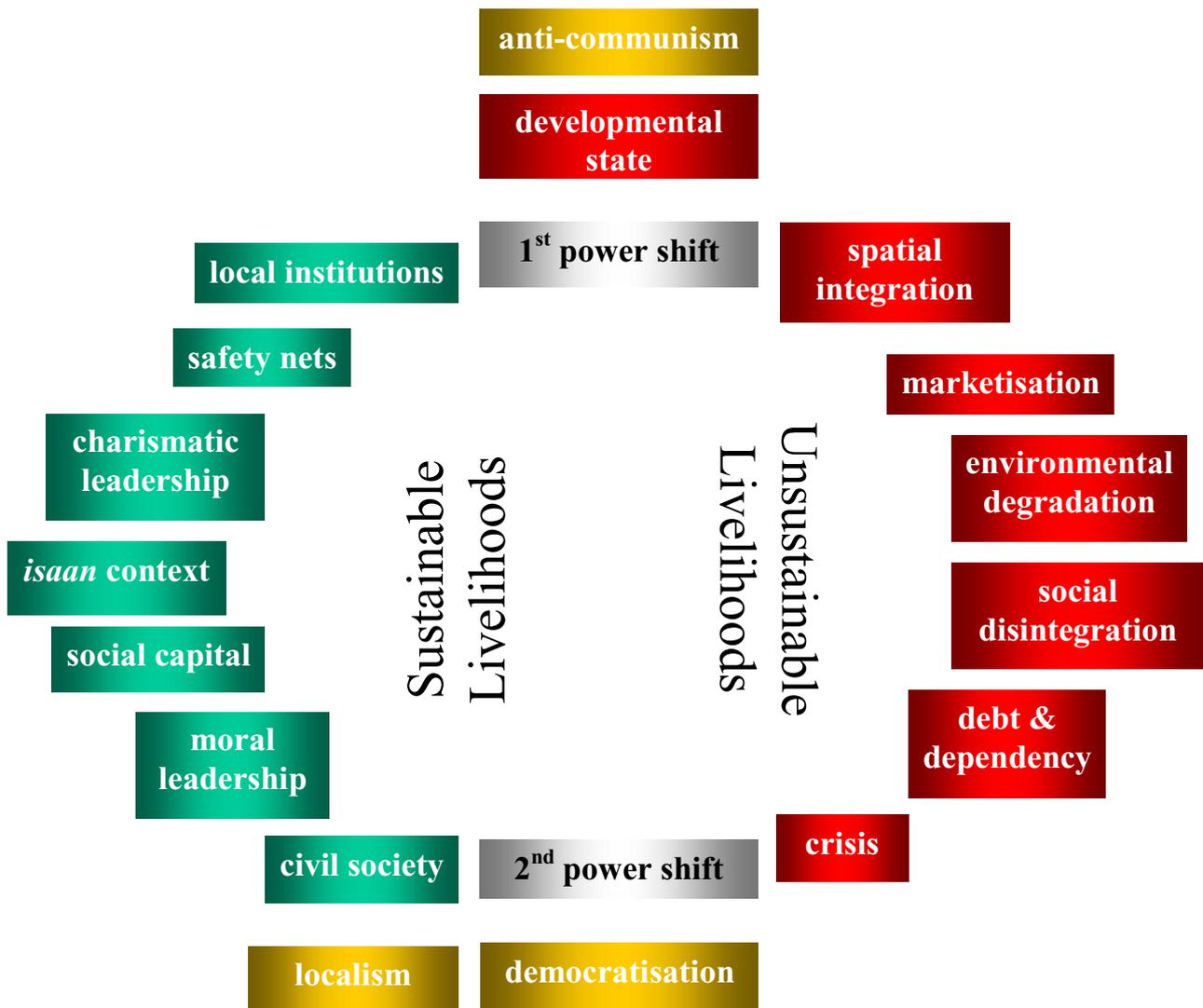


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

ate development, the communities started to wrest the initiative and control back from the state and the market. A growing emphasis was placed on self-reliance and the resuscitation of social capital and altruistic institutional practices which, as a form of ‘back to the future’, were nurtured by images and practices from a bygone era when the communities lived, by and large, in harmony with nature. However idealised and romanticised such an imagery may have been, there is little doubt that it has been highly effective in bringing about the rehabilitation of the natural environment and a reformed social cohesiveness, at least among significant segments of the study communities, as they have ‘clawed back’ a certain degree of control over the development process.

3. Power Shifts, Development and the Environment

Figure 1 reads clockwise from ‘*isaan* context’ and ‘charismatic leadership’, so we will commence the discussion at that point. The three study communities (Ban [village] Nasum, Ban Nong Kae and Ban Sakkumpun) are in Kut Chum District in the north-eastern Thai province of Yasothon (Map 1). The province is one of the poorest in Thailand, ranked 68 out of 73 provinces in terms of Gross Provincial Product in 1998. Some 85% of the province’s population listed agriculture as its principal occupation in 2000 (although having multiple occupations is quite common: Rigg 2001), and there is a perinatal mortality rate of 10.4 per 1,000 live births.

Historical Roots

The early history of the study communities is important in setting the scene for what was to follow over the subsequent more than 100 years. The area was settled, and the villages established, because of the locality's rich natural resources such as forest, water and wildlife. All three communities were established as off-shoots from existing villages, located within a 20-50 km radius, where population pressure was leading to growing land and resource scarcity. Grassland or lowland forest was cleared initially for vegetable cultivation, and later rice paddies were constructed, except in Ban Nong Kae where, because of its later establishment, only upland areas were available for cultivation, leading to a limited level of upland forest clearance. Ban Nasum means 'the village of watered and never dry land', Ban Nong Kae means 'the village by the old lake/pond', and the 'sok' in Ban Sokkumpun means 'a natural deep-water stream'. This hydrological imagery is important in relation to later developments in the study area.

Power in the early years might best be described as 'collective power', in that the communities were established as cohesive, homogeneous and largely self-contained social units centred around traditional charismatic leaders who held 'moral power' over other village members. *Isaan* (northeastern Thai) culture provided both the setting and a source of community cohesiveness in the early days. The leader of the migrant group that established Ban Nasum, Khun Klumsang Sangsri, became the village's first headman. Similarly, Old Saen, a man respected for his seniority and wisdom, led the settlers to Ban Sokkumpun and became the community's first leader. Significantly, the next leader of this village was Jarn Kruu Pa, a Buddhist monk (Jarn Kruu is a title given to a person who has been a monk for a long time), and he was succeeded by Jarn Kruu Nan. The latter two leaders in particular, who accounted for leadership right up to the end of the 1960s, sought to structure their community on sound Buddhist principles of moderation, self-reliance and giving/sharing. These traditional leaders had status, prestige and respect and, in a sense, moral power. Ban Nong Kae was quite different in that it was established in 1954 by a group of Christian migrants from nearby villages.

Livelihoods during the first half of the 20th century were modest but self-sufficient, and centred mainly on subsistence farming. In all three villages the sur-

Map 1: Study Area: Kut Chum District, Yasothon Province



rounding natural areas were important as a source of dietary supplementation in the form of aquatic creatures (which were available year-round in spite of a lengthy dry season), game, fungi, wild fruits and so on. Food that was produced or collected was often shared among kin or neighbours.

As was quite typical of *isaan* communities in the past, traditions of mutual support and reciprocity used to be quite strong (Klausner 1993). This was particularly the case in Ban Sokkumpun, which has a history of community-centred activities that were initiated and supported by respected and charismatic moral leaders who sought to find co-operative solutions to community problems. The nature of the natural ecology, with poor inherent soil fertility, a lengthy dry season and frequent problems of flooding and drought, had created an atmosphere of risk and uncertainty which was underwritten by local social practices and institutions, which thus functioned as 'informal safety nets'. People would overcome periodic shortages of food by sharing

their farm products with kin and neighbours, and by collecting natural products from the adjoining forests and water courses, which thus served as a common property buffer, particularly for the poorer members of the community. Practices of reciprocal labour exchange helped families cope with the periodic peaks in labour demand in rice farming. People were bound by social custom to help others in times of difficulty, although usually such support mechanisms involved only kin, friends and close neighbours rather than extending to entire communities. In general, social capital in the communities was strong, and this was an important source of security in times of environmental stress.

Ban Nasum and Ban Sokkumpun functioned largely as self-contained, self-reliant communities during the first half of the 20th century (Ban Nong Kae was not established until 1954). Power was hardly an issue. The controlling hand of the central Thai state was only lightly felt in this quite peripheral part of the country (the North-East, whilst nominally constituting a part of the Siamese state, had long functioned as a semi-autonomous and semi-autarchic territory). However, the study area was well integrated with other parts of the *isaan* region, partly through local networks of trade but principally through a process of *pay thiaw* (literally 'to go wandering') which young male northeasterners traditionally undertook within the *isaan* region during the long dry season in search of adventure, work, wives and prestige. This helped cement a sense of regional identity.

Isaan identity had started to become a hot political issue in the late 1940s, following the assassination of four prominent *isaan* MPs, including two cabinet members, in March 1949, ostensibly because of their support for the emerging nationalist movements in Indo-China (Fallon 1983). *Isaan* identity then became embroiled in an embryonic communist insurgency in the 1960s (there is not space to go into *isaan* regionalism in detail here: see Parnwell and Rigg 1996, for a useful overview).

There was a nationalist back-lash against the spread of communist-inspired regional separatism in the North-East, and Kut Chum District was declared a 'pink zone' (i.e. not at the heart of the communist insurgency, but strongly influenced by socialist sentiments), leading to the stationing of an army garrison in Ban Sokkumpun. This was the beginning of the

first significant power shift which led, ultimately, to the 'crowding out' of local institutions and practices by the hegemonic instruments of state control and power. There was little resistance to the imposition of state control: some villagers with communist or separatist sympathies fled to the jungle when the state back-lash commenced, where they remained for a decade or so.

The First Power Shift: Development and Environmental Degradation

In addition to the direct assertion of power through the presence of the army, the Thai state sought to diffuse the threat of communist insurgency through indirect means. With considerable financial support from USAID, which was linked in no small measure to American anti-communist efforts, the Thai government sought to ameliorate the sense of relative deprivation that was widely felt in the North-East by speeding up the process of regional development (Dixon 1999). This was manifest in the study communities in a number of ways. By far the most significant was the improvement in the road infrastructure. In all three villages cart tracks were up-graded to laterite [red earth] roads by 1975, and this made a dramatic difference in terms of ease of access to the 'outside world'. The volume of out-migration to central and southern Thailand increased very rapidly, and at the same time many more merchants from outside the area started to trade with the villagers. The boom in out-migration was stimulated by a booming external economy which villagers were keen to take advantage of in order to satisfy their growing livelihood needs (and also, after electrification in 1979, the desire to have electrical consumer goods). The growth in trade through and with external agents coincided with the Thai state's efforts to improve agricultural productivity – still the mainstay of the local economy – through its Accelerated Rural Development Programme, which promoted green revolution-type intensification and also the extension of farming into hitherto unutilised upland areas (Dixon 1999). The marketisation of the villages' economies which resulted from their integration into the wider Thai capitalist economy stimulated a massive and rapid clearance of most of the area's remaining forested uplands in order to cultivate cassava, maize, sugar cane and kenaf. Thus there were significant environmental impacts associated with the arrival of modern 'development' in the study area. We will focus on this first before

going on to look at some of the social implications of change.

Ban Nong Kae was originally surrounded by rich forest resources, but the forests had all been felled within eight years of the arrival of the road, partly through commercial logging to serve a saw-mill that had been built in the area, but driven principally by the desire to clear the land for the cultivation of upland cash crops. The resource buffer, upon which many villagers had depended, was gone. A similar process was identified in Ban Sokkumpun, although the clearance of forest took place earlier than in Ban Nong Kae because the area had not been suitable for wet rice cultivation and thus farmers had encroached into the forested uplands in order to grow vegetables and upland crops such as cassava, sugar cane, tamarind and longan. It was noted by villagers that the supplementation of diets through gathering wild products also became much more difficult as a consequence:

“Mrs Duangchan Thongnoi (Ban Sokkumpun), Mrs Dara Poapeng (Ban Nasum) and Mr Ratmanee Chanthai (Ban Nong Kae) had all noticed a decline in the quantity and quality of fish and other aquatic creatures in local water sources during the last 20 years or so. Mrs Dara indicated that fish were much easier to find in the past than at present, when population growth has put increased pressure on local natural resources. All three respondents indicated that over the last 10 years disease (tuay puay) had either killed fish or rendered them unmarketable, particularly during the dry season when concentrations of chemical residues in local water sources are particularly high. They attributed the source of the chemicals to local farmer, especially those growing corn and watermelons during the dry season. Mrs Duangchan relies on selling fish and crabs for her livelihood, particularly during the dry season, and has been badly affected by the scarcity and declining quality of aquatic resources in the locality.”

The collection of forest products for sale rather than self-consumption also intensified during the modern development push, and the forest was further damaged by commercial charcoal production.

Deforestation has, according to respondents in the study villages, affected local hydrological conditions (cf. the earlier reference to favourable hydrological imagery). The frequency and scale of drought has

increased significantly over the last 25-30 years, to the extent that drought is now one of the most significant physical stresses that the communities face. It creates a risky environment for agricultural investment, and it has also meant that another important resource buffer during the dry season is no longer a dependable source of supplementation for poorer villagers. Because there had never been a need for the formal social regulation of common property resource exploitation, because historically resource use had been limited, intermittent and largely restricted to the poor, there was thus no social mechanism to deal with the intensified exploitation of local natural resources that occurred following the era of marketisation. The decline in the quantity and quality of common property resources were seen to be particularly disadvantageous to villagers whose livelihoods were more marginal or insecure, such as Mrs Duangchan above, and who depended on these resources for dietary and income supplementation (Farmers Focus Group Meeting, Ban Sokkumpun 16 March 2002).

The incentives of the market and the encouragement of the state led to the rapid intensification of agricultural production, and a dramatic increase in the use, and subsequently the overuse, of chemical fertilizers, weedicides and pesticides. This in turn led to a significant degradation of the soil through the over-use of chemicals, partly due to the over-intensification of farming, and partly to farmers' ignorance of the appropriate volumes of chemicals to apply. The soil in the study villages is a friable mixture of land and loam, with a low inherent water-holding capacity. According to farmers' own accounts, soil fertility, soil structure and water-retaining capacity have all declined markedly in the last two decades or so (see below).

This brief sketch suggests that a number of environmental problems became apparent in the study communities as a direct consequence of the advent of modern development and spatial-economic integration, and as at least an indirect result of the shift of controlling power from internal to external bodies and institutions. This power shift has also been responsible for the 'crowding out' of a number of social institutions that had hitherto played an important function, not least as an informal safety net for the communities' weaker or more vulnerable members.

Social Change

The degradation of environment and natural resources in the vicinity of the three study communities is symptomatic of the weakening of social cohesiveness during the period of intense marketisation and external integration. Villagers in Ban Sokkumpun detected a distinct growth of individualism and competitiveness, with some members of the community being much less inclined to help others than in the past (Poor & Vulnerable Focus Group Meeting, Ban Sokkumpun 16 March 2002). Until the late 1970s it was common for villagers to practice a traditional labour exchange system, *long khaek*, at peak times in the farming cycle. However, as households faced deficits in agricultural production and, especially, the income they required to satisfy their rising consumption needs and desires, they started working on other people's farms in order to earn a cash income. Migration also interfered with households' ability to fulfil their reciprocal labour obligations. This led to a steady decline in the free exchange of labour and an inexorable increase in waged labour systems.

It was also common in the past for the people of Ban Sokkumpun (and the other villages) to overcome problems of periodic food shortage by sharing food and collecting natural products from the adjoining forest, such as bamboo shoots, sweet potatoes, etc. But as population has increased, drawing people in from a diverse range of locations as opposed to the single place of origin when the village was established, and as a result of the high volume of out-migration, social differentiation increased and social cohesion declined; the way of life and people's social relationships became more driven by commercial considerations. They increasingly "tended to use hiring and selling instead of sharing and helping", to use the villagers' own words (Leaders Focus Group Meeting, Ban Sokkumpun 24 February 2002). Respondents remarked on the much higher level of individualism, competitiveness and selfishness in the villages today when compared with the past (Poor & Vulnerable Focus Group Meeting, Ban Nasum 16 March 2002).

Indebtedness arose as a significant social problem from the early 1980s onwards. In addition to using migration as a means of obtaining the money needed to purchase modern consumer goods after electrification in 1979, many households illicitly and rather

recklessly used loans from the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) for the same purpose. Such loans were quite freely available from 1982 onwards, and resulted in many households becoming seriously indebted. Migration then became a means of alleviating debt. Thus, earlier state policies designed to solve the problems of poverty and agricultural backwardness through the provision of agricultural credit have, paradoxically, tended to contribute to the expansion of debt and insecurity in the study communities, especially in the form of debt traps. Farmers took out loans when credit was made freely available, and subsequently struggled to maintain their repayments. Those who struggle to meet their repayments often borrow money from other sources in order to clear their debts to the BAAC, and to remain credit-worthy in the eyes of the BAAC so that they can continue to borrow for their working capital and other needs.

Patron-client systems, which are found in economic, social and political organisations in Thailand from the national to the local levels, have also, locals argue (Discussion Group 1 (key informants), Ban Nong Kae 24 February 2002), led to the undermining of community solidarity. This is especially the case where the community leaders (as in the case of Ban Nong Kae) rely on a system of patronage which extends from politicians (local MPs), the high levels of the bureaucracy and members of the business community. This weakens social capital and the strength of the social safety net within the community. Patronage systems tend to work to the advantage of those who are included within them, but to the disadvantage of the excluded. This starts to open up an interesting point of contrast between the outward-oriented, clique-focused and patronage-based leadership of one of the study communities on the one hand, and the enlightened and moral leadership of another which, as we will see now, has been behind a recent reversal of power and practice that has led to a dramatic process of environmental rehabilitation and collective social action.

This brief sketch of some of the social and environmental problems that have become increasingly evident since the 1970s has posited as a cause of the shift in authoritative power from the local communities to extra-local institutions, agencies and actors, principally at the behest of a hegemonic developmental state driven initially by concerns of national

security and territorial integrity and subsequently by an agenda of centralisation and the consolidation of bureaucratic control. The gaining and maintaining of power was systematic and relentless, and led to significant asymmetries of power gravitating around politically appointed leaders, business elites and government officials - the principal actors in the first power shift. 'Power over' the mass of the people translated into a 'power to' control the development agenda and its social and environmental impacts.

The Second Power Shift: Social and Environmental Renaissance

The problems discussed above were brought into sharp relief by the economic crisis in 1997. People's heavy dependence on the external economy, as a market for their produce and a source of supplementary livelihood, was seriously exposed when the market suddenly contracted and migrant jobs were lost. The high level of indebtedness that had already been identified as a problem before the crisis was significantly magnified by the cost-price squeeze (rising cost of fertilizer and other farm inputs; falling market price of rice) that many farmers experienced at this time. Migration as a means of debt relief was no longer an option. Meanwhile, households had to cope with a high volume of 'reverse migration' as redundant workers sought refuge from the economic meltdown in their home villages.

The national economic crisis was seen less as a 'shock' and more a source of stress in the Kut Chum District households, and had the effect of encouraging many villagers to look closely at their livelihood strategies and their much-diminished capacity for self-reliance. They were encouraged in this endeavour by the promotion of King Bhumibol's New Theory of the Sufficiency Economy and the sudden popularisation of localist discourse. However, by 1997 one of the study communities in particular, Ban Sokkumpun, had already made considerable strides towards reversing the environmental and social decline of the previous three decades.

Since the 1980s, but particularly during the early 1990s, the community of Ban Sokkumpun has reasserted itself, driven by a confluence of internal and external factors and actors which, collectively, have accounted for a shift in the balance of power from state to non-state actors, and from extra-local to local institutions, in the process 'clawing back' some

of the territory and initiative that had earlier been 'crowded out' by state institutions and intervention. We will discuss the power dimensions shortly, but first we will briefly sketch some of the more important changes that have taken place and assess their environmental and social implications.

It started in 1983 when the abbot of the local *wat thaa laat* temple, Phra Khruu Supajarat, a development monk (*phra nak phatthana*) [monks who, instead of retreating from society in order to facilitate deep inner contemplation and enlightenment, take active responsibility for providing moral and practical leadership in order to guide their community back to a path towards sustainable development (Darlington 1998; Tannenbaum 2000)], returned to Kut Chum District after several years away from his home community. He was dismayed to observe the social and ecological consequences of the economic development that had taken place in his absence, and immediately he set about trying to restore the harmony and balance that he remembered from the past:

"Our ancestors were self-reliant. They exchanged with one another based on kindness & mutual respect. The natural environment was abundant & community relations were strong. Today we are increasingly dependent on others with whom we have no community bonds, only commercial relations. Even within this community we take advantage of, rather than supporting, one another. The environment gets worse. Community relations break down." (Phra Khruu Supajarat, cited in Powell 2000)

"All around me, I see people deep in debt, struggling to survive and beaten down with illnesses. And they seek the wrong way out by gambling, borrowing and drinking. Essentially, this is a result of villagers looking down on themselves. If they don't realise the dangers of city values, they will always be the tools of the rich and the state." (Phra Khruu Supajarat: cited in Sanitsuda 2001, p. 137).

The following discussion (based on participatory field-work in three villages in Kut Chum District during February and March 2002) outlines some of the activities that Phra Khruu Supajarat helped to initiate, following in the tradition of the respected monks who had provided moral leadership for the community from the turn of the last century.

Inasmuch as the abbot's activities constitute a clear illustration of the localist model, it is important to note that the initial impetus for the changes that are described had genuinely local origins, albeit influenced by the more general canons of Buddhism and the collective ideology of a growing corpus of development monks.

In 1983 he formed the *thaang say may* (New Way Group) from within the congregation of *wat thaa laat*. Because the temple had traditionally been a source of natural medicaments and holistic healing, attention first focused on weaning villagers off expensive proprietary medicines and away from unregistered medical practitioners by renewing interest in traditional remedies. His efforts were supplemented by the interest of a graduate of Thammasat University, Rosana Tositrakul, who had formed a Bangkok-based NGO called Traditional Medicine for Self-Curing (later renamed the Thai Holistic Health Foundation). Rosana was the first extra-local point of contact in this unfolding localist experiment. She spent an extended period in Kut Chum District documenting local flora that had medicinal properties. Together with the abbot, a local pharmacist, local traditional healers, village leaders, the New Way Group and a representative from the district hospital (Ms. Chujira Mitrawong), they formed a Natural Medication and Herb Interest Group (*chom rom sanum plai*), based in the temple complex. The Group planted medicinal herbs in the grounds of the temple and in people's home gardens, and later in forest areas that were rehabilitated by local people. The herbs were processed and prepared as medicines which were then made available to local villagers in a little shop. The original membership of the NMHIG was 26, but it now exceeds 300.

The early efforts of Phra Khruu Supajarat centred on regaining 'power to' – the ability to take control of local activities and behavioural norms - rather than confronting directly the extra-local 'power over' the community which I have argued lay behind many of their contemporary problems. However, in a local sense, it can be argued that the abbot exerted a certain moral 'power over' at least those members of his congregation who were like-minded. As time passed the number of 'converts' to new way thinking increased steadily.

A second, related focus of the abbot's attention was the rehabilitation of the community forest that had historically adjoined the temple grounds (and had been a source of medicinal herbs) but which had become badly degraded by farm encroachment and (common property) resource overexploitation. To prevent further destruction the abbot used Buddhist symbolism, and a device that was increasingly used by so-called 'ecology monks' (*phra nak anuraksa*), declaring the forest a religious sanctuary (see Darlington 1998; Tannenbaum 2000; Isager and Ivarsson 2002). He then proceeded to mobilise the community to rehabilitate the forest, encouraging farmers to donate land to the project and asking villagers to donate seedlings and saplings as alms to the local *sangha* (brotherhood of monks), rather than the more traditional food. A conservation group was established which encouraged villagers to replant trees and generally rehabilitate the local forest. The Natural Medication and Herb Interest Group bought 21 *rai* of forest land for the study and cultivation of medicinal and other herbs. Again, there was a certain power in the persuasiveness of the underlying moral argument: the more people joined in the New Way activities, the more social and moral pressure built on other members of the community to follow suit. It is important to emphasise, however, that the abbot was, and is, by and large 'preaching to the converted': even though the community's historical background had created a quite high degree of social homogeneity and moral propriety, many of the villagers have continued to follow the modern path which offers more in the way of the trappings of development than the New Way Group's back-to-the-future conservatism (Leaders Focus Group, Ban Sakkumpun 24 February 2002).

Another important development in Kut Chum District was the rapid and widespread adoption of organic and chemical-free rice agriculture. Rosana Tositrakul was again influential in this development. After spending a year in Japan studying with the guru of natural farming methods, Masanobu Fukuoka, she invited him to visit Thailand and Kut Chum District. His visit raised the profile of organic farming and stimulated enthusiasm to adopt chemical free (*khaaw plotsarn*) and organic (*khaaw insii*) rice farming methods. There is an economic incentive to convert to organic farming: farmers can obtain 10,000 Baht (\$200) per tonne for organic rice, compared with 5,000 Baht (\$100) for

ordinary rice, and although labour costs are higher on account of the greater amount of weeding that has to be done, they save considerably on the cost of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Productivity is little different from non-organic rice on account of the extent to which soil fertility has declined through the over-use of fertilizers in the past. Chemical-free agriculture has helped to reduce levels of indebtedness among rice farmers in Ban Sökkumpun. Now 65% of farmers in the district practice organic or chemical-free rice farming. Kut Chum District has subsequently become the principal locus for organic rice-farming in Thailand, accounting for almost 55% of the country's total production (Sanitsuda 2002). Organic produce is marketed by GreenNet, a Thai fair trade NGO. Organic rice farming has gone hand-in-hand with efforts to rehabilitate the area's soils which, with a very low inherent fertility (sandy loams with less than 1% organic content), had suffered from nearly two decades of intensive nitrogen-based fertilizer use – in part because of the infertile soils, and in part because farmers did not own enough land to produce an adequate livelihood, thus fertilizer was used copiously to raise productivity - which had adversely affected soil structure (Farmers Focus Group, Ban Nasum 25 February 2002). To quote Mr Mun Samsee, Headman of Ban Sökkumpun:

“We started using chemical fertilizer in 1965. At first we used 4-5 sacks of the fertilizer [on our farm], and then we gradually increased it until we were using 20 sacks [at a cost of 3,000 Baht: \$60]. Even with that amount of fertilizer yields did not increase. Meanwhile the soil became harder and the quality of the [rice] products got steadily worse. After that there was a crisis with a disease called [in the vernacular] *tuay puay* [which affected fish in water courses through chemical seepage]. During that time I read a book called *A Revolution With Only One Piece of Straw*, written by [Masanobu] Fukuoka. I then started to plough straw into my rice fields, to use animal manure, and to dress the soil in other ways. Other farmers followed me, and eventually these farmers became teachers in natural fertilization methods in other parts of Yasothon Province.” (Interview, Headman Mun Samsee 14 August 2004).

There had also been instances of pesticide poisoning: Old Ken, the uncle of the present Headman

of Ban Sökkumpun, had died from the mis-application of pesticides on his tobacco crop; Headman Mun Samsee, demonstrating Turkish tobacco cultivation to other villagers, had also been very ill from pesticide poisoning – an experience that led him to becoming a champion of chemical-free rice cultivation (Interview, Mr Somwang 13 August 2004). Villagers became much more aware of the dangers of chemical use in farming from this event. Initially, rice yields fell as farmers shifted to organic production (in the case of Headman Mun, from 7 tonnes to 3-4 tonnes from his 20 *rai* [3 ha.] farm). Thus, villagers resuscitated natural bio-fertilization methods in their fields, and the community regularly gathers to manufacture, as a collective activity, natural fertilizer from buffalo, cow, chicken and other animal waste, rice husks and composted material – the product being sold back to farmers for 1 Baht (\$0.03) per kilogramme. Some 40% of riceland in the district is now treated in this way. Villagers claim that soil fertility and structure (including water-retaining capacity) have improved considerably since this practice began. They also state that organic rice production is more profitable because, even though productivity is lower and labour costs higher, the market price for the rice is better (10,000 Baht [\$200] per tonne, compared with 5,000 Baht [\$100] per tonne for non-organic rice) and they do not have to spend money on increasingly expensive [especially since the 1997 economic crisis] chemical fertilizers.

A community rice mill was opened in 1991, and this has now been converted to handle both organic and non-organic rice. The initiative to construct a community mill started six years earlier, on the initiative of members of three villages in Kut Chum District (Ban Sökkumpun, Ban Naaso and Ban Pawhai) as a way of obtaining a fairer price for the milled rice and at the same time extricating farmers from the usurious practices of the then rice mill operator, who could set his own financial terms for rice-milling, storage and purchase, and to whom a good many of the villagers were in debt. However, it took six years to get approval from the authorities for members of the community to fund and construct their own mill, reflecting the reluctance of officials – presumably coloured by the community's 'pink' and separatist past, but possibly also influenced by lobbying from the established mill owner - to cede authority to proceed with what was a fairly radical

step towards economic self-reliance. The mill was finally approved in 1991, and was financed in part by a local share issue to community members who joined the Love Nature Rice Mill Association (*rong sii khaaw chom rom rak thammachat*: there are now 1,200 members). The Community Mill pays farmers on average 167 *baht* (c. £2.20) more per tonne of rice than the going market rate, and considerably more than was paid by the millers upon whom they had previously been dependent.

Other community activities (see Table 1) included a community welfare store, opened in 1980 on the initiative of Mr Mun Samsee, the Headman of Sokkumpun Village, and Mr Muen Polachai, a respected elder villager. The aim was to make it easier for villagers (more vulnerable ones in particular) to purchase goods in times of economic hardship, whilst sharing profits from sales within the community by means of a shareholding system. The community sought to help itself by establishing the *hed yuu hed kin* group (Sustainable Livelihood Group, which follows a philosophy of self-reliance) in 1999, which sought to revive old local traditional and cultural ways of living such as reciprocal help and sharing, the Mysterious Principal Ceremony (where farmers contribute part of their rice surplus at the end of the harvest season and this is redistributed to rice-deficit households), rotating credit and savings groups, housewives groups, and various paddy, buffalo and labour banks, formed in different villages at different times to underpin food and livelihood security especially for more vulnerable villagers, and so on (Table 1).

Table 1: Community Activities in Kut Chum District (and year of formation)

Community Welfare Store (1980)
New Way Group (1983)
Natural Medication and Herb Interest Group (1983)
Forest Conservation Group (1987)
Forest replanting (post-1987)
Soil rehabilitation (post-1990)
Community Rice Mill (1991)
Chemical-Free and Organic Rice (1991)
Volunteer Corps (1994)
Environmental Protection Group (1995)
Mysterious Principal Ceremony (1995)
Sustainable Livelihoods (<i>hed yuu, hed kin</i>) Group (1999)
Community Currency System and Community Bank (2000)
Community Markets (post-2000)
Housewives groups
Paddy banks
Buffalo banks
Labour banks
Fertilizer funds
Cattle funds
Community savings groups

The final illustration is perhaps the most insightful as far as the struggle for 'power to' is concerned. On 29 March 2000 a Community Currency System (CCS) was introduced, partly at the behest of the *hed yuu hed kin* group as a direct response to the local effects of the 1997 financial crisis (e.g. a cost-price squeeze; the need to reduce consumerism and alleviate debt), but also drawing in significant measure on the involvement of domestic and international NGOs which were committed to a localist ideology. The system centred on the issuance of currency notes (see Figure 2) called the Bia Kut Chum [*bia* is the Thai word for sapling, and was used to symbolise a system that would grow and spread over time; but *bia* were also used in the past as a medium of exchange prior to monetisation, consisting of sea-shells, etc], via a community bank, which were to be used for the exchange of goods and services within the community, principally at community markets which operated in each of the participating villages on a rotating basis. The objective was to stem the leakage of money and value from the communities - as people were using the national currency to

Figure 2: The Bia Kut Chum Community Currency Notes

purchase basic necessities and consumer goods that were produced outside the district - and at the same time stimulate local demand for local goods and services. It was also hoped to use the CCS as a means of rekindling social networks and practices, and of giving (in fact reinforcing for) women a prominent position in intra-community commerce and social transactions.

The CCS was intended as a manifestation of the principle of self-reliance - which was much in vogue at the time - based essentially upon long-forgotten systems of barter and exchange, and rekindled networks of trust, mutuality and reciprocity. The Bia notes were designed by local schoolchildren and, as Figure 2 shows, were adorned with a variety of locally rooted symbolic cultural, social and livelihood images, such as the rural landscape, labour exchange (together with the gender division of labour), barter and exchange, alms-giving, post-harvest threshing, the rocket festival, the Songkran water festival, and so on. The notes, signed by the local abbot, also symbolise important Buddhist principles of sufficiency, moderation and non-attachment. They are also, as we will discuss shortly, highly idealised, romanticised and stereotypical images of a communitarian rural Thailand, typically relating to a situation that prevailed 4 decades or so ago rather than the modern, differentiated and competitive countryside of today.

The CCS was introduced with the financial and logistical assistance of a consortium of national and international NGOs, including the Local Development Institute (LDI), a Thai NGO that had been established by one of Thailand's leading localist thinkers and activists, Prawase Wasi. The LDI acted as a channel for international development assistance to the CCS project from Canada (Canadian University Service Overseas, Canadian International Development Agency), Japan (Japan Foundation) and the UK (Voluntary Service Overseas). Thai partner agencies in the project included the Appropriate Technology Association, the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development, the Rural Reconstruction Alumni Friends Association, the Spirit in Education Movement and the Thai Volunteer Service. A grant from the Japan Foundation was used to print the currency notes, and members of the CCS were allocated up to 500 Bia Kut Chum each to use in local transactions [often in conjunction

with the national currency – the Bia and the Baht had an equivalent value, but were not convertible]. As a member's stock of Bia became depleted through the purchase of goods or services, that person was obliged to earn more Bia by providing services or goods for other community members.

From a power perspective the CCS represented a bold attempt by the community to reassert control over what was intended to be a significant segment of the local economy, and to break away from the mainstream model of development by building something that was seen to be locally appropriate. There is no doubt that the system fitted in well with a prevailing ideology that had been nurtured by Phra Khruu Supajarat and his followers, in which self-sufficiency, self-reliance, moderation, harmony and community were key elements. There is also little doubt that the prevailing situation (together with the external links that had already been created by Rosana Tositrakul and the organic farming movement) was an important reason why so many NGOs honed in on this particular peripheral and marginal area for what amounted to a 'social experiment', albeit based upon similar community currency and LETS (local exchange trading system) schemes around the world (see e.g. www.appropriate-economics.org). If the Kud Chum experience proved to be successful, there were plans to promote it in other parts of rural Thailand (Apichai et al. 2002).

Thus, in a sense there was a mutual benefit to be derived from these two sets of actors working together: the NGOs, reflecting a wider movement of democratisation and a consolidating civil society, had cleared political space and developed 'power over' which, in turn, gave the local community 'power to' control its own developmental destiny; the community provided a test case for the NGO in its efforts to promote its localist model more widely in rural Thailand. However, it is not entirely certain that the two sets of agendas – that of the local community and that of the localist NGOs – were in perfect harmony. The stereotypical imagery of rural Thailand that the CCS was built upon, and the back-to-the-future model that it proposed, whilst appealing to many of the 'converted' had little to interest the greater majority of the communities' members. Although it attracted a lot of attention, the CCS drew only 120 members among a total district population of 68,023 in 2000 (www.statoids.

com/yth.html); only 33 of the members used the Bia at all, and only 10 did so on a daily basis (Apichai et al. 2002, p. 9). However, this is partly explained by the events that unfolded less than three weeks after the CCS was introduced – events that signified the disproportionate reassertion of power by the state, concerned about the national implications of this local socio-economic experiment, and this modest ‘clawing back’ of ‘power to’ by a local community. As such, it engages the question about what happens to the previous holders of power as other actors empower themselves.

The CCS was launched in a hail of publicity. It was held up as the epitome of the ‘sufficiency economy’ that HM King Bhumibol had advocated in the aftermath of the economic crisis, and a strong symbol of self-reliance. The launch was attended, *inter alia*, by the well-known Thai social critic, and advocate of localism, Sulak Sivaraksa – a frequent thorn in the side of the establishment. The publicity drew the attention of first the Ministry of the Interior, concerned about this local statement of independence and collective endeavour and its resonance with the community’s recent separatist and communist past, and then the Bank of Thailand, worried about the implications should this local community’s apparent secession from the national currency spread across the country. The Bank of Thailand (BoT) ruled the CCS and the community bank illegal (only the BoT is legally entitled to accredit banks) under the 1962 Commercial Banking Act, Section 9 (Apichai et al. 2000), and declared the CCS a ‘threat to national security’ (*Bangkok Post*, 27 April 2000). Kut Chum District was soon swarming with police, government officials, a Fact Finding Committee of the BoT, intelligence agents and the media. Villagers were intimidated by threats of criminal proceedings into ceasing the use of the Bia Kut Chum. A return visit to the field-site in August 2004 found that people had reverted to using cash instead of the community currency – even after it was renamed the ‘Bun Kut Chum’ [*bun* meaning the Buddhist phenomenon of ‘merit’ in Thai] in order to remove any connotation with money.

4. Reading Power in Development and Environment

Table 2 provides a simple summary of the shifting dynamics and loci of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’ in the study community across time and space, as detailed in the above discussion, together with some adjectives to describe the different forms of power that have emerged.

The case study has sketched the historical evolution of development and some of its environmental consequences in a cluster of rural villages in a marginal corner of northeastern Thailand. The basic image created by the case study is of a pendulum swinging backwards and forwards along a continuum between sustainability and unsustainability. The paper has argued that two ‘power shifts’ have occurred, one around the 1970s and another around the 1990s, which have had a significant bearing on the nature of development in the study area and some of its environmental and social effects. Kut Chum District is not typical of the whole of rural Thailand, but it is representative of a growing number of communities throughout the country which have sought to re-build sustainable development by adopting, more or less, a localist model. The case study refers, in the main, to a significant segment but not the entirety of the local population: approximately half of the households, spread across the three villages with which this research has been principally concerned, have had little to do with the changes that have taken place, preferring instead to stick to the mainstream model of economic growth, and maintaining a predominantly external orientation to their livelihoods and social networks. It could also be argued, I would concede, that, if we read localism as a *retreat* from the mainstream rather than a fundamental confrontation of the status quo, power *per se* may have had little to do with the changes that have taken place. However, I would maintain that the community has successfully found a way of establishing ‘power to’, if not ‘power over’, and in any case the study represents just a single piece in a much larger mosaic of change which, collectively, amounts to a significant shift in the balance of power, as was discussed at the outset of this paper.

The case study has cast some light on the questions that were posed at the beginning of the discussion. It has been shown how the strengthening of ‘power to’ at the local level rested heavily on a small number

Table 2: Power Shift and the Confluence of Local and Extra-Local Forces

Space	External	National	Regional	Local	Environment/ Development
Time					
Phase 1 (pre-1940s)			Limited national integration. <i>Pay thiaw</i> & a growing regional identity (diffuse power)	Charismatic leadership (moral power)	Balance. Harmony. Self-reliance. Social cohesiveness.
Phase 2 (1940s-1970)		State integration (authoritative power)	State bureaucracy (superficial power). Regional separatist movement (collective power)	Growing engagement with the external economy through migration.	Slowly mounting pressures through population growth. Sense of relative development deprivation. Growing social differentiation
1st Power Shift					
Phase 3 (1970s)	US anti-communism (implicit power)	State repression (authoritarian power over)		Army corps stationed in villages (power over).	Slowly weakening social institutions. Development hiatus.
Phase 4 (1970s & 1980s)		State development project & mechanisms (bureaucratic power)	Regional development institutions (bureaucratic power).	‘Crowding out’ of local institutions. Political leadership supplants traditional leadership.	Rapidly intensifying environmental degradation. Reduced self-reliance. Development for some.
2nd Power Shift					
Phase 5 (1990s)	International NGOs. Contestation of the orthodox development discourse (alternative power)	National NGOs. Contestation of the mainstream development project. Grassroots approaches to local development (empowerment)		Strengthening civil society. Re-emergence of charismatic leadership (re-assertion of moral power) ‘Clawing back’ of institutional space (power to)	Environmental rehabilitation. Strengthening social institutions. Regained self-reliance. ‘Development’ redefined.

of key actors – principally, in this case, the moral and charismatic leadership of Phra Khruu Supa-jarawat, which provided the catalyst for change, his ‘converted’ congregation (the Buddhist-socialist ideology of the community can be argued to have created a path dependent predilection towards the kinds of changes that ensued) and some of the village headmen (in particular Phuu Yay [headman] Mun Samsee from Ban Sokkumpun, the village’s sixth leader who has carried on the traditions of his charismatic forebears). It can only be postulated that, without the involvement of extra-local actors, in the form of Rosana Tositrakul, GreenNet and a plethora of NGOs, the abbot’s localist drive may

have been somewhat conservative in that it only had local knowledge and referents upon which to build. It is nonetheless ironic that this localist model has, for example through the marketing of organic rice, led to the community becoming even more internationalised than was the case before the localist experiment commenced: the rice is sold as far afield as Italy, Switzerland and Germany, and vacuum packing equipment has recently been imported from Israel. The wider civil society has thus been influential in articulating a genuinely local struggle to a national process of change (democratisation, etc) which is both opening up the power field within which localist initiatives can flourish,

and is drawing nourishment from them. The collective contestation of the balance of power appears to function bi-directionally: from the bottom-up and the outside-in.

The case study has demonstrated that, in the right circumstances, humanity is not trapped in a *cul-de-sac* that leads only to unsustainability and injustice. A shift in the balance of power, however modest in its spatial or political extent, can make a huge difference in terms of allowing alternative paths to emerge, and arguably more appropriate routes towards development to be charted. However, as we saw in the case of the community currency system, the expectation that the established order will simply wither away at the first challenge to its grip on power is clearly unrealistic. Notwithstanding the fact that democratisation in Thailand has forced the agents of the state and the established order to become far more open, accountable and participatory, with state-civil society partnerships now the norm rather than the exception, and notwithstanding the way that localist rhetoric spouted freely from the Ministry of the Interior, and almost every state development agency following King Bhumibol's post-crisis pronouncement, the use of a sledgehammer by state agents to crack the nut of a local experiment with the non-cash economy (*The Nation* 7 May 2000) demonstrates clearly that 'power to' may be easier to obtain than 'power over'.

Whether the story of Kut Chum District represents an appropriate mix of local and extra-local forces in the struggle for sustainable development is open to conjecture. The word 'appropriate' is difficult to define categorically. The fact that the local community has been more or less left to its own devices since the government crack-down on the CCS in 2000 (as observed during a field visit in August 2004) reinforces the impression that the local currency system was indeed little more than a social experiment by external NGOs which had little long-term stake in and commitment to this local community. Leadership responsibility has thus returned to the key local actors who set the process in motion. However, Phra Khruu Supajaratwat is now ailing – he has suffered poor health in recent years, and has less energy than before. Likewise Headman Mun Samsee. The abbot observed in August 2004 that divisions are becoming more evident within the community. There is, for instance, a dispute concerning the direction and function of the Community Mill: some members of

the steering committee want it to be run along much stricter business lines, others want it to continue to play a social function, subsidising farmers with above-market-rate prices for their rice. The source of moral power is fading, and cracks are beginning to appear in the collective power of the community. The pendulum appears once again to be on the move.

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