

THAILAND

Defining sustainability from below

Ranee Hassarungsee, Pakorn Lertsatienchai, Tatikarn Dechapong and Pattraporn Chuenglersiri
 Social Agenda Working Group (Social Watch,Thailand)
 Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute

As the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development recognizes, achieving sustainable development and inclusive economic growth requires greater attention to equality and justice, both on national and international levels. This requires the adjustment of equilibrium between the private sector and civil society and a guaranteed universal social protection floor. Sustainable development means seeking a balance of human rights, economic development and a secure environment, which will bring about people's well-being in the short and long terms. This report looks at several of these areas in detail, focusing on social and cultural rights, in particular child development; economic security, particularly land and resource use; labor rights, particularly for women; environmental degradation and the role of transnational corporations. It summarizes the factors leading to a classic 'development trap' and identifies some important things that need to be done to overcome this.

Social and cultural rights: child development and family life

Academic research in the field of child development has found that the human brain architecture grows rapidly in the first three years of life. Important aspects of child development, including brain development, occur rapidly until ages 5-6, before they gradually slow down. The first years of life (0-6 years) are especially important. Good nutrition, quality childrearing, caring, opportunity to learn through playing and activities, these are basic necessities for children. These basic necessities prepare children to be ready for school, to grow into healthy adults and to be able to participate in the country's

development in the future.

However, in Thailand, Dr. Rajata Rajatanawin, former Minister of Public Health, stated that in 2015, of 4,929 first-year primary school students tested for IQ scores, the average IQ score was 93.1, a drop from 94 the previous year. Children in urban areas scored 100.72 on average, while those in provincial areas scored on average 89.18. (The standard point is 100.) The findings suggested that these scores were the result of high levels of malnutrition, inadequate childrearing and restricted opportunities to learn.¹

A survey conducted by the Thai National Statistical Office and UNICEF on the situation of children and women in the country in 2012 (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey: MICS4)² indicated that children in Northeastern and Southern Thailand experienced malnutrition and low body weight and height in higher proportions than those in other parts of Thailand. For children younger than five years, the survey found that malnutrition leads to many outcomes. For instance, 16.3 percent were shorter than the standard; 9.2 percent weighed less than the standard and 6.7 percent had a lower weight-to-height ratio than the standard. Children in poor households faced a higher chance of dwarfism and weighed less than children in richer households.

¹ Press Release, Ministry of Public Health, 27 May 2015; available at: <http://www.hfocus.org>.

² National Statistical Office and UNICEF Thailand, Report on the Situation of Children and Women 2012, 27 May 2015.

In terms of overall economic development, which involves improving labor skills in order to decrease dependence on cheap labor, it is clear that children's nutrition and learning ability must be nurtured and developed, starting at a very young age.³

If we look at the local level, we can see the problems facing children in more detail, particularly those stemming from the working conditions of parents (usually mothers) who work in the informal sector. Problems include allergies caused by the chemicals and other materials their mothers work with at home as well as the lack of care resulting from being left alone home while their mothers are out working. The lack of childcare centres is a problem shared by both workers in the formal sector and by home-based workers. These circumstances pressure workers, especially those in formal employment, to send their children to live with grandparents in other provinces. This situation sometimes widens the gap between children and parents.

This pattern can also be seen in existing childcare centres. A study of a municipal childcare centre in Northeastern Thailand found a total of 72 children (42 boys and 30 girls) between 2 and 5 years old, only 16 of which live with their parents, while 36 children were living with grandparents. Five of them had parents working in other provinces, three had deceased fathers, 22 had separated parents, 24 had divorced parents, while there was no information on 2 children.⁴

While grandparents are becoming the main childcare-givers in both urban and rural areas, the situation in rural areas is better than in urban, since rural residents usually own their own land and housing, which is less common among those urban areas. Urban residents

mostly rely on commercial commodities and services, for which they need income.

Moreover, the study found that urban communities have a less extensive kinship relation system than do rural communities, as they are inhabited by people from many places, who come to find work in the city. Grandparents find it easier to look after grandchildren than in urban areas, where a 70-year-old woman still has to work outside the home to support her family.

For natural resource abundant areas such as those in the South, the study found that the costs of quality childcare generally exceeded the fees paid to caregivers, which minimized the quality of childcare, especially the quality of nutrition. For example, out of 14 children who received care from Salameng Child Development Centre in Gongra district, Pattalung province, only four passed the weight-for-age standard.

Another problem identified in the study is the failure of parents to provide nutritious food--buying children snacks, soft drinks, sweet green tea, sweet iced tea all of which contain large quantities of sugar, as well as poultry treated with growth hormones, which can cause premature growth in children. This in turn causes other problems, such as underage marriages and teenage parents, neither of whom are capable of heading the household. Some young parents, particularly teenage fathers, are unemployed and addicted to substances.

In Northern Thailand, the study found that there were a decreasing number of children 0-5 years old in the care of their parents. Twelve percent of children 0-2 years old were in childcare; 76.3 percent of children 2-5 years old were in kindergarten or childcare. Moreover, we found that children ages 1-5, while living with their parents, spent approximately two hours in front of a television set. Relationships between parents and children were becoming more distant because parents focused more on working outside, and did not have time for parenting. New challenges are also emerging as the number of migrants' children is rising.

Comparing data at the local and national levels, the study found that 21 percent, or 3 million children were

3 Civil society groups proposed that the state should implement a universal childrearing coverage scheme for those from birth to 6 years old, in the amount of 600 baht (about USD17) each, paid to parents or relatives caring for the child; see Task Force for Children in Thailand, Social Agenda Working Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute and Partners, 2015.

4 Advocacy Programme for the Child Support Grant in Thailand, Social Agenda Working Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, Task Force for Children in Thailand, supported by UNICEF, Final Report, 2014.

not living with their parents, who had moved into urban areas to find jobs. The National Statistical Office's survey data on children and women, supported by UNICEF,⁵ in 2012 showed that, in Northeastern Thailand, 30 percent of children (or 1 in 3) were not living with their parents because their parents migrated to find jobs in other parts of the country. Data from other countries, such as Laos, suggested that only 5 percent of Laotian children were not living with their parents because of internal migration. Meanwhile, the percentage of children who did not live with their parents is 4.4 percent in Vietnam, 3.4 percent in Costa Rica and 6.5 percent in Nigeria.

According to one study, 90 percent of children who do not live with their parents live with their grandparents instead. Also, 36 percent of childcare-givers, most of whom are grandparents, are likely to have some sort of mental health risk.⁶ The study indicated that children who do not live with their parents are more likely to experience delayed development, especially in linguistic ability, for example, word meaning and word combination. Forty percent of fathers who migrated to work in other areas had not sent money home for the last six months and 30 percent never communicated with those back home.

Economic security: land and resource use

“Land is life”, is the slogan the People Movement for Social Justice (P-MOVE) uses at their rallies, reflecting the perception of farmers of the importance of land to life. One female farmer spoke of the importance of land, natural resources and life, saying that land was like air, it is both life and essential to life. Natural resources and land are sources of food, medicine, jobs, income, housing, and the body's final resting place. The absence of rights to land and housing causes mental and physical distress and suffering, while for rich people, land is what they can make a fortune from.⁷ According to the Land

Institute Foundation, some 90 percent of the population in Thailand own only 10 percent of the land, while 10 percent own 90 percent of the land.⁸

Farmers and other in rural areas are often unable to access government development programmes. For example, community funds focus on lending but do not support the efficient use of the funds, and therefore become a cause of debt. Farmers tend to take out a loan from one place to pay off another. Their debt seems to be on the rise. In the case of the Women Development Fund, which encourages loans and interest, we found that only 29 percent of women as a whole, or only 9.6 percent of women who are more than 15 years old could receive loans. Part of the explanation is that loan applicants must propose draft projects, which they are unable to do, particularly those in rural areas.

Moreover, when women take out loan without understanding money management, they fall into debt, taking out more loans to pay for household needs. Data from the Debtor Rights Reform Association showed that 95 percent of Thai people are in debt; 80 percent of those who are bearing the financial burden are women, responsible for both their own and their husbands' debts, particularly when their husbands leave.⁹

The designation of special economic zones in several border areas results in new residential zoning arrangements. Food sources and forests are demolished and transformed into industrial factories, roads, and other large infrastructure projects which facilitate the growth of industry and commerce. People in local communities are always the last to know about these plans and lack opportunity to participate in deciding them.

5 UNICEF Thailand, press release, 23 June 2015.

6 Aree Jampaklay, Institute for Population and Social research (IPSR), Mahidol University; UNICEF Thailand press release, 23 June 2015.

7 Naiyana Waikhom, Northern Development Foundation, Document for the Thai Social Watch Report 2016, Social Agenda Working Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, Social Justice Project, 2015-2016.

8 See: <http://thaipublica.org/2012/10/inequality-in-thailand/>

9 Thailand Information Center for Civil Rights and Investigative Journalism (TCIJ) interview with Thasnee Jaikarun, Chair of the Debtor Rights Reform Association, 17 May 2012.

Sustainable development and labor rights¹⁰

Unemployment, deplorable working conditions and structural adjustment in production and employment has resulted in downsizing, employee lay-offs, short-term employment and subcontracting in the industrial sector. In 2015, of a total of 6,184,926 factory workers, 1,102,464 were professional workers and 5,082,462 were manufacturing workers. The majority - 957,998 workers - were in the food and beverage sector; 571,607 worked in rubber and plastic manufacturing and 519,220 worked in the automobile industry. It is estimated that in the next five years, the Thai industrial sector will experience a shortage of approximately 300,000 manufacturing workers, which will increase the employment of foreign workers.

Stalled industrial growth has led to rising levels of unemployment, especially in the export sector. Large transnational corporations, both in and outside the industrial zone have recently laid off a large number of workers, including 31,000 from January to May 2015.

Lampoon province's industrial estate applies advanced technology in the manufacture of export goods. Data as of August 2015 suggested that 78 factories on this industrial estate, with an estimated 72,427 million baht investment, employed 44,662 factory workers.¹¹ Nevertheless, manufacturing labor employment remains unsystematic, consisting of 1-3 month work contracts. Some workers had been working for a year but still worked on short-term contracts, with insecure and temporary extensions.

Many companies violate workers' rights by breaching labor laws, forcing workers to work overtime and on weekends and holidays, without additional wages. Some companies force workers to take holiday leave in line with company holidays, obliging them to use sick leave or simply be absent without pay when they want their own holidays. There is also an issue with student

trainees, who do not receive full wages and are not covered by labor laws, as well as not being able to join a labor union.

Rights of pregnant workers are violated as well. Some companies let pregnant women work night shifts and overtime, in violation of article 39 of the Labor Protection Act, which specifies that pregnant workers are not allowed to work during the hours 10.00 pm to 6.00 am, work overtime, work on holidays or perform any task that is harmful to their health. Many companies take advantage of a loophole in the labor law (article 75) that enables them to force pregnant women to stop working during pregnancy, which violates both the ILO Convention 183 on maternal protection and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Unbalanced relationship between human rights, economic development and the environment¹²

In the interests of "development," local resources are extracted and exploited in many ways, including petroleum extraction facilities, deforestation, large-scale land purchasing, water management, and even tourism. This is particularly true in the South, where oil and petroleum, including natural gas, oil extraction facilities and gas separation plant, are in every province around Thai Gulf. Development plans include construction of industrial estates, deep-water ports, several nuclear and coal power plants, steel manufacture and other factories. People in local communities are effected by Industrial development projects which expanding in the South angrily expressed that, "fending for ourselves and families is hard enough, but we still have to fight capitalists, authorities and state that supports capitalists."¹³

The push for large-scale infrastructure in the South reflects planning without any opportunity for people in the community to participate in decision-making

10 This section is based on background paper prepared by Saowalak Chaytaweep, Social Agenda Working Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, Social Justice Project, 2015-2016.

11 Lamphun Industry Office, August 2015.

12 This section draws on an article by Lertchai Sirichai; available at: <http://social-agenda.org/article/715>

13 Social Justice Forum organized by Social Agenda Working Group, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 2012.

processes. According to the local protestors, this is done by many strategies including:

1) Concealment: some projects are undertaken quietly so the locals cannot see that they are all parts of larger scheme.

2) Inadequate or misleading information, including false advertising: for coal mining for example, there are no impact assessments or information on lessons learned from abroad. The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) distributes t-shirts proclaiming “EGAT cares for children. Electricity helps children read.” However, EGAT electricity production is designed for big industries and largely based on coal. Similarly, in the construction of the port of Pakbara in Satul province, there was no information on the impact of construction of a previous port that destroyed Petra Island National Park, a biologically diverse tourist attraction.

3) Lack of government oversight: normally, development projects must go through regional or local government’s assessment. But today, corporations such as Chevron can freely operate in local communities, deploying public relations teams and hiring academic researchers to do environmental and human impact assessments. These assessments rarely involve local consultations, as many researchers distrust locals and ban them from recording their work.

Local people lack the knowledge to ask authorities for help, nor do they know the channels to initiate negotiations with big corporations. Their resistance has taken the form of road blocks, to which the corporations responded by offering rewards to local and cultural leaders to lead counter-demonstrations, at times leading to clashes between groups of people.

4) Political intervention: although people’s rights and voices should be respected according to the law, officials in affected areas, such as Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) sometimes mobilize people to support big corporations, bypassing environmental and human assessments, leaving those who oppose big development projects a minority.

From “development trap” to sustainable development

The preceding discussion illustrates the following classic “development trap”:

- Rural areas are continuing to undergo dramatic transformation. Community self-reliance has decreased in rural areas along with the loss of local resources that are the basic foundation of life and means of production. As agro-industry takes over, farmers are becoming paid labor or even contract laborers on their own land. Land resources are being excavated mining and other extractive industries owned by transnational corporations.
- People from rural areas form a large reserve body of labor, paid less than minimum wage, lacking job security, and easily replaced. Such labor is crucial for industrialization because it helps reduce production costs (in fact, Thailand already faces the problem of reduced ability to compete with neighboring countries’ lower wages and their new status of outsourcing destination).
- Meanwhile, current government development plans call for big projects to facilitate the provision of resources, fuel, energy and transportation to the industrial sector and urban areas.
- All of this will cause long-term degradation because of under-reproduction of labor and the environment. For labor, families do not have enough means and supports to nurture the next generation of skilled workers and knowledgeable citizens. Children are losing the ability to learn from their earliest years, causing difficulties in improving their skills. With regard to the environment, extractive industry gains resources at the cost of environmental degradation and community conflict; agro-industry depletes the soil so rapidly that it cannot be restored fast enough. Small farmers reproduce a cycle of biophysical override (intensive use of chemical substances to maintain productivity) and new land clearance, leading to invasion of forest land.

It is important to note that social relations on the path of development have become value relations. “Civil-State” (Pracha-Rath) policy ironically has built a shared agenda between the Government and the industrial and corporate complex, enabling industrial and corporate interests to become the main drivers of development rather than the society and the citizen. This is worsened by long-standing social problems, such as gender bias.

Social issues have been discussed to counter and reverse this transformation, as for example the conversation on building caring and sharing societies. Ideologically, this signifies the revival of social and ethical relations to replace the dominant money relation. This goes hand in hand with emerging wave of voluntarism, on national, international and regional level.¹⁴ For social policy, it means that there should be more collective actions in managing the commons and protecting the social protection floor against growing privatization, as in education and public health.¹⁵

(In the public health sector, civil society participates in opposing a co-payment payment system and calls for universal coverage.)

Knowledge production is urgently needed to enable the country to cope with risks and insecurities, and proposing development alternatives. As big development projects forge an atmosphere of distrust and conflicts in the initiation of projects in the future, local communities need to improve their ability to mobilize local knowledge. They should become civil society professionals, to stand up against academics who work for big corporations.¹⁶ This role should not be limited to local communities only, but should also be the role of main knowledge producers. For example, policies on science and technology, aiming to serve private companies and industries, should rather steer towards social benefits, such as increasing the proportion of renewable energy production and disaster management.

¹⁴ Nualnoi Trirat, et al., ASEAN's Morality: Voluntarism in the Mainland Countries, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2016

¹⁵ Seminar on Caring and Sharing Society, at Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, Social Agenda Working Group, July 2015.

¹⁶ Pakorn Lertsatienchai, et al., Monitoring Communities' Socio-Cultural Changes from Extractive Industries in Thailand, Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 2016.