

**THE ASSEMBLY OF THE POOR IN THAILAND
FROM LOCAL STRUGGLES TO NATIONAL SOCIAL
MOVEMENT**

BRUCE D. MISSINGHAM

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University**

October 1999



Acknowledgments

I am indebted to a huge number of people for their assistance, support, and encouragement in making this study possible. This research was undertaken as a PhD program in the Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies, and I was based in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies of The Australian National University. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr Eric Jackson, for his diligent and highly professional support, advice and encouragement during all stages of the research. My two other advisers, Dr Chris Ballard and Dr Richard Cross, also provided invaluable advice and enthusiastic assistance throughout the entire project. Chris Baker, Dr Craig Reynolds, Dr Scot Barron, Dr Andrew Walker, Dr Roger Averill, Dr Yvonne Mallett, and Professor Tessa Morris-Suzman all provided valuable feedback on parts of this text. Maxine McArthur helped proofread the text and Lisa Brown provided crucial IT support. The Research School was a collegial and stimulating context in which to study. Many fellow postgraduate students at the ANU provided inspiration and friendship, especially Simon Baker. I also greatly appreciated the friendly support of all the administrative staff in the ANU. This thesis is wholly my own original work, except where otherwise cited in the text.

B. D. Missingham

Bruce D. Missingham
Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies
Division of Pacific and Asian History
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
The Australian National University

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to a large number of people for their assistance, support and encouragement in making this study possible. This research was undertaken as a PhD program in the Graduate Program in Southeast Asian Studies, and I was based in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies of The Australian National University. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr Peter Jackson, for his diligent and highly professional support, advice and encouragement during all stages of the research. My two other advisers, Dr Chris Ballard and Dr Richard Grove, also provided invaluable advice and enthusiastic assistance throughout the entire project. Chris Baker, Dr Craig Reynolds, Dr Scot Barme, Dr Andrew Walker, Dr Roger Averill, Dr Shellet Mallett, and Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki all provided valuable feedback on parts of this text. Maxine McArthur helped proofread the text and Kris Brown provided crucial IT support. The Research School was a collegial and stimulating context in which to study. Many fellow postgraduate students at the ANU provided inspiration and friendship, especially Simon Baker. I also greatly appreciated the friendly support of all the administrative staff in my Division.

The research was funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award and by a fieldwork grant from the Division of Pacific and Asian History. The National Research Council of Thailand made the fieldwork possible and helped me obtain research visas. The Research and Development Institute of Khon Kaen University supported my application for research permission, and provided a helpful and interesting base for my research while in Thailand. My thanks to Katherine Bowie for her friendship, advice and encouragement during the time we were both visiting researchers at the RDI. I also wish to thank Jarin Boonmathya for his friendship and for generously sharing his knowledge and experience with me. I must also thank Manit Duangphrom and my other friends at the Nam Phong River Recovery Project in Khon Kaen for their assistance, encouragement and friendship.

I cannot name all the members of the Assembly of the Poor, nor their NGO and

academic advisers whose wholehearted cooperation and assistance made this thesis possible. Indeed, as reflected in the text, most of them requested anonymity during interviews, and therefore it would be inappropriate to name them here. Nevertheless, there were many villagers and NGO activists who welcomed me to share their lives and their struggles for a while, and who I now count among my valued friends. They were generous with their time and their knowledge, even in the midst of physically demanding and mentally draining campaigns and protests. The activists and villagers in the Assembly of the Poor were also a constant source of inspiration. I hope that this thesis does them justice.

During the course of the research my father-in-law and good friend, Graham Whittaker, passed away. I would like to thank Graham and Norma Whittaker for their interest and encouragement during the research.

Without the encouragement and support of my partner Andrea Whittaker I doubt that this thesis would have been possible. Andrea has shared all the ups and downs, joys and frustrations involved in undertaking a PhD, and has been not only a loving and loyal partner during the last ten years but also my most stimulating intellectual companion.

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Margaret and Stan Missingham, who nurtured in me a love of learning.

Abstract

This thesis presents an ethnographic account of a grassroots social movement in Thailand, the Assembly of the Poor, drawing on theoretical perspectives from political ecology and social movements literature. The Assembly is the first national association representing the interests of the rural poor to emerge in the country since the activities of the Peasants' Federation of Thailand in the 1970s. Established in 1995, the Assembly of the Poor is a coalition of villagers' groups, including some urban slum dwellers, and non-government organisations (NGOs) campaigning on environmental and local livelihood issues such as the impacts of large dams and community land rights in reserved forest lands and national parks. After its formation the Assembly quickly became famous in Thailand for staging mass protests in Bangkok to force the government into negotiations.

An ongoing debate in the political ecology and social movements literature concerns the potential of grassroots environmental movements to effectively transform social structures of inequality and exploitation in Third World societies. Taking the Assembly of the Poor as a case study, this thesis explores the social processes of organisation and mobilisation through which collective action and protest is constituted, and investigates the extent to which the Assembly is able to challenge dominant discourses of development, effect social change and broaden grassroots democracy in Thailand. Although the Assembly has made only limited material gains relative to its goals (but in themselves unprecedented in Thailand), I argue that the movement demonstrates significant changes in grassroots political consciousness, and innovative forms of activism, organisation and political struggle. Through its campaigns and protests the Assembly endeavours to create new social and political spaces for the assertion of collective identity and political agency, express its grievances and social critique, and put forms of grassroots democracy into practice.

Chapter 2 examines the historical background and origins of the Assembly of the Poor. Rapid economic development, industrialisation and social change induced a rising

demand for land, forests, water and other rural resources by rural people, the state and industry. Local communities increasingly got caught up in “resource wars” which erupted throughout the country as they actively resisted the growing threats to their livelihoods and land rights. This resurgence of rural politics is also related to the history of the NGO movement as a domain for middle class activism and rural development work. In Chapter 3, I present a broad overview of the Assembly and discuss how it has been able to overcome a fragmenting impetus, and combine a large number of diverse, locally-grounded conflicts into a country-wide movement able to campaign and negotiate at a national level.

We cannot fully understand the Assembly as a social movement without appreciating its structure based on local groups linked by thriving social networks. In chapter 4 I give an ethnographic account of the emergence of the Mun River Villagers' Committee and its campaign against the Pak Mun Dam. I focus on explaining how concerted collective action emerged in the context of environmental degradation. In Chapter 5 I examine the educated, middle class activists who play a key role in building and sustaining the networks which constitute the Assembly. Considering the anti-hierarchical and democratic ideology espoused within the Assembly, this handful of activists hold a position of power and influence which contradicts their expressed democratic ideals.

In chapter 6 I present a detailed ethnographic account of the Assembly's 1997 protest, demonstrating should it not be seen as simply an instrumental political strategy. Its demonstrations dramatise conflict and make it visible while also forcing open spaces and opportunities to express the language of human and democratic rights to support their demands. Demonstrations express a social critique about the usually unseen impacts of ‘development’ on poor and marginalised people.

I address issues of participation, democracy and civil society in Chapter 7. The movement has attempted to enact collective leadership, participation and grassroots democracy through meetings, forums and networks. Villagers and NGO activists are constructing and extending the social domain of civil society in an effort to build autonomous countervailing forces to challenge the political and economic power of the state and economic elite.

Languages, Transcription and Thai References

Two main languages were used by the subjects of this study, Thai and Lao. Thai is the ‘national’ language of Thailand, originating among the people of the central region of the country. People from other areas often refer to it as the ‘central language’ (*phasa klang*) to differentiate it from a number of colloquial languages and dialects of regional Thailand. Thus, in the text I often refer to Thai as Central Thai to underscore this distinction. Lao is the domestic (ie first-learned) language of the great majority of people in the Northeast region and hence of many of the groups in the Assembly of the Poor. Within Thailand Lao is frequently referred to as ‘Isan language’ (*phasa isan*), as ‘Isan’ is a Thai-Pali word meaning ‘northeast’ (see Diller, 1991; Keyes, 1989). Moreover, Lao exists as a spoken language but its written form has virtually disappeared. Therefore, during fieldwork in Thailand all interviews, including the majority which were conducted in Lao, were transcribed by research assistants into Thai script. Throughout the text I have indicated when interviewees and speakers use Lao. If not otherwise indicated the original was spoken in Thai. Documents extracted have all been translated from written Thai. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

The following transcription system, adapted from one devised by Peter Jackson (personal communication), is used throughout the thesis for Thai and Lao terms. I make a few exceptions for well-known conventions, such as *baht* for the Thai currency. For well-known place names and public figures I follow the spelling conventions used in Thailand’s English-language newspapers, the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*.

It is important to note that the Assembly of the Poor, the subject of this study, and the Forum of the Poor are the same association, called in Thai the *samatcha khon jon*. Soon after it was formed the *samatcha khon jon* officially titled itself in English the “Assembly of the Poor” on all relevant documentation. Since then the *Nation* newspaper has followed that official translation. The *Bangkok Post*, on the other hand, continues to call the association the Forum of the Poor, following an alternative translation of the word *samatcha*.

Following Thai academic convention, the names of Thai scholars are listed alphabetically according to **first name** in citations and the References section.

Following the Australian Commonwealth Style Guide, newspaper articles are cited in the text with details of source, date and page number if no author is named in the source. Where authors of newspaper articles have been given, the name and date system has been used for the citation and a full reference appears in the reference list.

THAI VOWELS

<i>Phonetic Symbol</i>	<i>Thai Symbol</i>	<i>Phonetic Symbol</i>	<i>Thai Symbol</i>
a	อะ, อັ-, inherent	or	โอะ, inherent
a	อา	or	โอา
am	อำ	oi	โอย
ao	เอา	oh	เอาะ
ao	อาว	o	อว, inherent
ai	อัย, ไอ, ไอ	oi	ออย
ai	อาย	oeh	เอาะ
e, eh	เอะ, เอ็-	oe	เเอ, เอ็-
e	เอ	oei	เเอย
ew	เอ็ว	u	อู
ew	เอว	u	อู
ae	แอะ, แอ็-	ua	อว-, อัว, อัวะ
ae	แเอ-	uay	อวย
ae	แเอา	ui	อูย
i	อิ	eu	อี
i	อี	eu	อี-
ia	เอ็ยะ, เอ็ย	eua	เอ็อะ, เอ็อ
ia	เอ็ยว	euay	เอ็อย
iw	อิว		
ru', roe, ri	ฤ, ฤา	leu, loe	ฦ, ฦา

THAI CONSONANTS SYLLABLE-INITIAL VALUES

<i>Phonetic Symbol</i>	<i>Thai Symbol(s)</i>	<i>Phonetic Symbol</i>	<i>Thai Symbol(s)</i>
k	ก	ph	ผ, พ, ภ
kh	ข, ค, ฆ	f	ฝ, ฟ
ng	ง	m	ม
j	จ	y	ย, ญ
ch	ฉ, ช, ฌ	r	ร
d	ฎ, ด	l	ล, ฬ
t	ฏ, ต	w	ว
th	ฐ, ท, ฒ, ถ, ฑ, ฒ	s	ซ, ศ, ษ, ส
n	ณ, น	h	ห, ฮ
b	บ	-	อ (Glottal
p	ป		stop symbol)

THAI CONSONANTS SYLLABLE-FINAL VALUES

<i>Phonetic Symbol</i>	<i>Thai Symbol(s)</i>
k	ก, ข, ค, ฆ
ng	ง
t	จ, ฉ, ช, ฌ, ฎ, ฏ, ฐ, ท, ฒ, ด, ต, ถ, ฑ, ศ, ษ, ส
n	ญ, ณ, น, ล, ฬ
p	บ, ป, ผ, ฝ, พ, ฟ, ภ
m	ม
y or i (see vowels below)	ย
w	ว

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	IV
LANGUAGES, TRANSCRIPTION AND THAI REFERENCES.....	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	IX
TABLES, FIGURES AND MAPS.....	XII
PHOTOGRAPHS.....	XIII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Contesting Development: Environmental Movements and Social Change	3
Political Ecology	6
Social Movements Theory	10
Assembling Identity, Mobilising Culture.....	13
Direct Action and Protest	15
Civil Society, Participation and Hegemony.....	16
Social Networks in Everyday Life.....	19
The Assembly of the Poor as a Social Movement	20
Following the People: Anthropological Perspectives and Ethnographic Methods ...	22
Representing the Assembly	26
2 ORIGINS	31
Economic Development and its Consequences	32
Rural Resistance and Organised Opposition	36
Middle Class Activism: From the Student Movement to NGOs	41
Resurgence of Grassroots Politics: Direct Action and Nonviolent Protest	50
The “Assembly of the Poor” Conference	55
Conclusion	57
3 FROM LOCAL STRUGGLES TO NATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT:	
AN OVERVIEW OF THE ASSEMBLY	59
Who are the Assembly of the Poor? Villagers, NGOs and Academics.....	60

Villagers' Organisations and Networks.....	61
Origins and Bases of Support.....	64
Development NGOs	65
Academics and Student Activists	66
Building a Movement: Organisation and Decision-making	67
The Power of Public Protest: Campaigns and Activities	70
Ideology and Social Critique: Contesting Development	73
“Solidarity is Power”: Forging Identity and Solidarity	79
The Social Contract	80
Collective Identity: Representing “the Poor” and “the People”	80
Conclusion	84
4 THE RISE OF A VILLAGERS' MOVEMENT:	
A CASE STUDY OF THE MUN RIVER VILLAGERS' COMMITTEE	86
Perspectives on Grassroots Action	87
Everyday Life and Livelihood Before the Dam	88
The Pak Mun Dam Project	93
Emergence of Local Opposition.....	94
NGO and Student Activists.....	99
Campaigns and Protests	101
Stop the Dam!	102
Compensation Demands and Direct action	105
Identity and Opposition	108
The Fishers' Long March and Marathon Protest	108
Mun River Villagers' Centre	112
Conclusion.....	114
5 'CANDLES IN THE DARKNESS' OR 'THIRD HAND'?	
NGO ACTIVISTS IN THE MOVEMENT	118
NGOs and Activism.....	118
NGO Activists: Who Are They and Why Do They Get Involved?	120
Grassroots Support Organisations and Activism at the Local Level	130
Activism in Action	138
Conclusions	145

6 THE VILLAGE OF THE POOR CONFRONTS THE STATE:

THE LIFE OF A PROTEST	148
Interpreting Protest	152
Background and Course of Events	156
Mobilising People and Resources	159
Discourses of Protest and Nonviolence	163
Accommodation and Containment by the State	165
The Village of the Poor: Space, Place and Protest	166
Organising and Sustaining the Village of the Poor	169
Protest as Ritual and Spectacle: Protest Street Theatre	172
Nurturing our Image: Assembly of the Poor and the Media	174
The Sanam Luang Rally: Demonstrating Strength and Support	176
Speaking the Language of Power: Negotiation Meetings	181
School of Politics: Transforming Political Consciousness	188
Conclusion.....	191

7 DEMOCRATISING CIVIL SOCIETY?

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY AND POWER WITHIN THE ASSEMBLY	199
Social Movements as Struggles to Democratise Civil Society and Everyday Life..	203
The Assembly of the Poor as a Struggle for Participation and Democracy	204
Collective Leadership and Internal Democracy	206
Collective Leadership in Practice: The <i>Pho Khrua Yai</i> Meeting	211
NGO Activists and Power.....	217
Democracy and Decision-Making in the Local Villagers' Organisation	220
Managing Conflict at the Local Level	227
Conclusion.....	229

8 CONCLUSION: SOURCES OF POWER AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION..

Material and Political Outcomes	236
Networking and Activism within Civil Society	238
New Forms of Identity and Consciousness	243
Ideological and Discursive Challenges to Development	246
REFERENCES.....	249

Tables, Figures and Maps

TABLES

Table 1	Approximate membership numbers in the Assembly of the Poor	65
Table 2	Distribution of grievances by region	65

FIGURES

Figure 1	Structure of the Assembly of the Poor.....	69
Figure 2	Assembly of the Poor groups in Ubon Ratchathani	135
Figure 3	The Assembly of the Poor magazine, <i>Siang prachachon</i>	219

MAPS

Map 1	Map of Thailand and its regions.....	29
Map 2	The lower Mun River and Pak Mun Dam.....	89
Map 3	Central Bangkok and the Assembly of the Poor protest site	149

Photographs

1	The main stage in the Assembly of the Poor's protest rally	30
2	One night during the Assembly of the Poor protest	30
3	The Pak Mun Dam and fish ladder	116
4	The Mun River Villagers' Centre in 1996	116
5	The entrance to the Mun River Villagers' Centre	117
6	A meeting of villagers' representatives at the Centre	117
7	The entrance to "Village of the Poor No. 2"	195
8	Inside the "Village of the Poor" protest site	195
9 & 10	The Assembly marches to a rally at Sanam Luang park, 16 March 1997	196
11	Preparing for the march outside Benjamabophit Temple	197
12	The crowd and stage at the Sanam Luang rally	197
13	The symbolic boxing match	198
14	Assembly delegates meet with government representatives	198
15	Wat Khiriket in the hills just outside Chiang Mai	233
16	A <i>pho khrua yai</i> meeting in progress inside the <i>sala wat</i> (temple hall)	233

*Respected fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters,
Please listen to a verse from me, Panya Tongyu
I'm going to sing the story of fishing and the Pak Mun Dam
The history of the Assembly and the Mun River...*

*Oh, mothers and fathers,
The floodwaters have destroyed our livelihood...
But before the dam many Thai people
Came to make their living on the Mun River...
Many villagers hunted there for fish, which never dwindled
Helping each other to catch fish to eat and to sell
Why did such an abundance of fish
Rise up the Mun River?...*

*When they came to build the government's dam
We joined together against the project
Bringing our ideas together to find a solution
Many advisors joined in to help us
It was like that, fathers and mothers
Big people, little people all joined in...*

*We marched for twelve days down the Khong Jiam Road
Many of us marching together in a powerful procession
Brothers and sisters, you saw us on television
Which broadcast our voices and publicised our story
Thai brothers and sisters in trouble
Who marched together and occupied the Pak Mun Dam wall
Until the government paid us compensation
We saw the fruits of coming together to depend on each other...*

*Now, why have poor people joined together once again to fight
In the Assembly of the Poor?...*

(Written and performed by Panya Tongyu,¹ Bangkok, 13-3-1997)

On 25 January 1997 the Assembly of the Poor (*samatcha khon jon*) commenced a mass demonstration on the streets facing Government House in Bangkok. The Assembly, a coalition of rural villagers and urban slum dwellers, encompassed groups from every region of Thailand. Over twenty thousand people joined the rally, refusing to move until

¹ This is a pseudonym, not his real name. All participants in this research gave information and interviews on the condition of anonymity. See methods section below, Following the People.

the government responded to their petition. The protesters transformed the usually quiet streets into a bustling, makeshift village in the heart of the city. On many nights during the rally Panya Tongyu, a villager from Northeast Thailand, took to the stage and performed songs he had written to entertain his fellow villagers. In his younger days Panya had worked as a *mo lam*, a performer of Lao folk songs, and had spent fourteen years travelling throughout the Northeast and Laos, before returning to his home on the banks of the Mun River in Ubon Ratchathani Province. One sultry day in March, while we sat together among the crowd of protesters on the dusty pavement, Panya scribbled down the words to a new song in a battered notebook. That night, accompanied by another villager on a *khaen*, a traditional Northeastern musical instrument (see Photograph 2), Panya performed his *mo lam* song to the heat-exhausted demonstrators. He sang about his fellow villagers living along the Mun River and the coming of the Pak Mun Dam. In his song he travelled along the river, describing communities and fishing sites from his own home to the confluence with the Mekong fifty kilometres away. Panya sang about the villagers' demonstrations against the dam, their long protest march from the provincial capital to the dam wall in 1994, and their first small victory in their fight for compensation from the state. This song was a story about one successful protest, told to inspire another. I present extracts above to begin this thesis.

Almost every night, after announcements about the day to day organisation of the rally and the progress of negotiations with the government, protesters told their own particular stories from the stage, their local community's battles with the state and their group's reasons for joining the Assembly of the Poor. Some of those from the Northeast, like Panya, transformed their histories into *mo lam* songs. Many, like the Mun River villagers, were fighting over the impacts of dams. Others came to demand fair compensation for dislocation by large-scale development projects, or defend their claims to land or forest threatened by state forestry policy. Through these stories and performances the members of the Assembly continually talked to themselves, consolidating the common ground of shared problems, building the solidarity needed to sustain their protest, and seeking the language and symbolism to express their struggle in the public sphere and negotiate with the government.

The protest was an extraordinary event in the history of political action by rural and urban poor in Thailand. The Assembly of the Poor had been formed in December 1995

with the goal of increasing its members' political influence and bargaining power with the state through a larger, nationwide umbrella organisation. This was the first national organisation representing rural villagers' interests to emerge since the rise and fall of the Peasants Federation of Thailand amidst the political turmoil of the 1970s. Following its inception, the Assembly staged a number of high-profile, mass protests aiming to compel the government to resolve the grievances of its members. Early in 1996 they forced their way onto the national stage with a mass demonstration by 12,000 people at Government House that lasted for five weeks and won extensive coverage in the media. By the beginning of 1997 their network had grown, so that when they returned to rally in Bangkok they were able to mobilise over 20,000 people to protest. While in Bangkok they attracted almost daily coverage in the media, much of it positive and supportive. Ordinary villagers from marginalised communities spoke on national TV, were quoted in the daily newspapers, and negotiated face to face with senior government bureaucrats, cabinet ministers and Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. The protest rally continued for over three months (ninety-nine days), making it the longest lasting popular demonstration ever mounted in Bangkok. At the time, it appeared to achieve considerable success. When the protesters finally dispersed and returned to their homes on 2 May 1997, they had won a government commitment to address all of their grievances.

Contesting Development: Environmental Movements and Social Change

There has been growing interest, particularly among researchers in the fields of political ecology and social movement studies, in the widespread emergence and impact of "grassroots" environmental movements throughout the Third World during the last three decades.² Growing numbers of local people, mostly in rural areas, have mobilised collectively to defend their livelihoods or rights over local resources. The environmental and social impacts of dams, and conflicts over land, forests and other natural resources arising from economic development, have created new motives for mobilisation and political action, and new sources of solidarity and organisation (Ghai, 1994). At the same time, increasingly globalised discourses of environmentalism (Milton, 1996) and

2 Examples include (Adams, 1990; Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Cummings, 1990; Escobar, 1995a; Esteva & Prakash, 1992; Friedmann & Rangan, 1993; Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Guha, 1989, 1997; Hirsch & Warren, 1998; Parnwell & Bryant, 1996; Peet & Watts, 1996a; Peluso, 1992; Redclift, 1987; Redclift & Sage,

sustainable development (Bryant & Parnwell, 1996; Redclift, 1987) have provided new ways of expressing and legitimising their claims, and of finding common cause with urban-based organisations and sections of the middle class (Hirsch, 1997c). In many cases they have been supported by non-government organisations (NGOs), sometimes linking them into national, and even international, organisational networks (Julie Fisher, 1993, 1998). Through these growing NGO networks and globalising discourses, many grassroots movements have been linked into a global debate - indeed, some say a global movement - over development and its alternatives (Rahnema, 1997). The Chipko movement (Guha, 1989) and opposition to the Narmada Dam scheme (Esteva & Prakash, 1992; Fisher, 1995) in India are probably the most well-known examples.

The proliferation of new organisations and movements around resource and environmental conflicts in the Third World has sparked a heated debate in the academic literature about their political and social implications (see, for example, Escobar, 1995a, 1995b; Linkenbach, 1994; Peet & Watts, 1996a; Yearly, 1994). Bryant and Bailey (1997:158), in their book on *Third World Political Ecology*, note that a

potentially revolutionary...development in terms of the topography of a politicised environment since the 1980s has thus been the emergence of grassroots organisations as a political force to be reckoned with in many parts of the Third World.

Many commentators see grassroots collective action as representing a new type of social actor: 'new' social movements bringing about progressive social and political change in the societies in which they emerge (for example, Wignaraja, 1993b). As Peet and Watts (1996b:33) sum up the argument, these new "Third World people's movements rather than First World workers' movements are seen as potentially transformative of the existing social structures". Hence, they even suggest a specific field of study - "liberation ecology" - to explore the contribution of grassroots environmental movements to social transformation and challenging conventional notions of development.

This debate about the potential of grassroots environmental movements for social and political transformation constitutes the central issue of this thesis. Taking the Assembly

1994; Sethi, 1993; Taylor, 1995)

of the Poor as a case study, I explore the social processes through which collective action and protest are constituted, and study the extent to which the Assembly has been able to effect social change, transform power relations and broaden grassroots democracy in Thailand. Indeed, claims about the importance of the Assembly as an agent of social transformation in Thai society have already been made by some Thai political scientists, notably Suthy Prasartset and Praphat Pintoptaeng. Suthy (1997) asserts that the Assembly of the Poor is a “new social movement” (*khabuankan khleuanwai thang sangkhom mai*) and “is one leader in the struggle to strengthen civil society” in Thailand. Praphat (1997a:54) notes that the central aim of the Assembly is to “transform social relations of power to enable local communities freedom to manage local resources and compel the state to guarantee local community rights, and recognise local knowledge”.

Although I argue that we need to avoid an overly romantic faith in the progressive nature or potential of grassroots movements such as the Assembly of the Poor to generate far-reaching structural change in society, I do argue that significant changes are taking place in grassroots political culture and, hence, the horizons of activism and political contestation. An aspect of this is the demonstration of creative and innovative forms of activism, organisation and political struggle. Material grievances stemming from the economic interests and class positions of Assembly members are important, but what is relatively *new* about the Assembly derives from the organisational and networking capacities developed in partnership with NGOs, and strategies open to them to articulate their claims with influential symbolic and discursive representations, such as environmental protection, sustainable development, community rights, participation and democracy. Through its campaigns and protests, as I explore throughout the thesis, the Assembly struggles to create new social and political spaces for the assertion of collective identity and political agency, expression of its grievances, as well as the practice of participation and grassroots democracy as a challenge to the dominant political culture.

My approach to these issues has been primarily through ethnographic research, and I believe that ethnography lends itself well to studying collective action in all its complexity. Throughout the thesis I present ethnographic material as appropriate to demonstrate this. Ethnography has been particularly useful in revealing the creative and

socially constructed nature of identity, collective action and protest, and the deployment of culture in political struggle. In focusing on the experiences, knowledge and practices of different actors in the Assembly of the Poor I explore the ways in which participants give meaning to their actions and the movement as a whole. This approach reveals the range and diversity of motivations and understandings, and internal tensions and contradictions that open up the complex and manifold nature of the movement.

In the remainder of this chapter I will introduce the main theoretical concepts and issues that I have drawn on in my account and analysis of the Assembly of the Poor, before outlining my ethnographic methods in greater detail. My approach, as I suggested above, has been informed by two broad fields of study which have both focused on environmental conflict and collective action in Third World contexts, namely, political ecology and social movements theory.

Political Ecology

Political ecology does not constitute a cohesive body of theory as such, but is generally concerned with applying Marxist political economy to an analysis of the causes and consequences of environmental change and resource conflicts in the Third World (Bryant, 1992; Bryant & Bailey, 1997). The field encompasses a variety of perspectives and approaches to the sociology and political economy of the environment. A broad body of work that has emerged out of this approach provides a wide ranging critique of development policy and practice in terms of their effects on the environment and rural peoples' livelihoods, and their contribution to the intensification of resource conflicts. In this study I draw on political ecology's focus on the political, economic, and ideological dimensions of environmental conflict to provide theoretical tools for contextualising and analysing the Assembly of the Poor. Clearly, the concern with delineating the social actors involved, their class bases and material interests, the relations of power between them and the broader political and social context will contribute to understanding and interpreting the social processes involved.

The political ecology approach first emerged during the 1980s, stimulated by the need to understand Third World "peasant and agrarian societies in the throes of complex forms of capitalist transition" and the environmental consequences of those

transformations (Peet & Watts, 1996b:5). Research focused on the political and economic causes of environmental change, social conflict over access and control of resources, and the political and social consequences (Bryant, 1992). Several authors pointed to the contradiction between the roles of the state as promoter and regulator of economic development, and as manager and protector of the natural environment (Bryant, 1992:15). Development policies which accelerate natural resource exploitation and promote the construction of irrigation works, dams and other kinds of infrastructure have transformed and often degraded the environment. Studies of conflicts over access brought into focus the power relations between different social groups, especially in conflicts between local people and the state, or capitalist business interests. Other studies explored the impact of environmental change on different socio-economic groups. Rural people in the Third World mostly depend on land and local natural resources for their livelihood. Collective environmental action by the poor, therefore, largely stems from struggles in defence of livelihood (Friedmann & Rangan, 1993; Guha, 1997; Redclift, 1987). Thus, as Bryant (1992:26) notes, environmental degradation “not only exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, but also serves as a catalyst for political protest, notably as manifested in environmental movements”.

The proliferation of new resource and ecological conflicts in the Third World has stimulated some writers to try to expand the analytical power of political ecology by drawing on social movements theory and poststructural perspectives on discourse and power, notably in the recent volume *Liberation Ecologies*, edited by Peet and Watts (1996a; see also Redclift, 1992). These authors highlight the cultural and discursive terrain on which environmental movements must engage and oppose power. They review recent work which demonstrates the socially constructed and contested meanings of “development”, “environment”, and “sustainability.” The ideas and discourses of economic development that have dominated the modern development project in the Third World since World War II have been a major cause of environmental and ecological change affecting populations and communities. Social conflicts may be contests over the meanings of environment or sustainable development, as much as struggles over material conditions such as access and control over resources (Escobar, 1995a).

Political Ecology in Thailand

Political ecology and a concern with the political, economic and social dimensions of environmental change have informed a great deal of research in Thailand, and there is now an extensive corpus of academic and scholarly work available on development and environmental change in that context. As a matter of fact, these studies have made important contributions to Third World political ecology in general and received a great deal of interest beyond the boundaries of 'Thai studies'. This body of work reflects an empirical concern with the environmental impact of Thailand's rapid economic development and the growing influence of environmental politics during the last two decades. Until recently researchers focused on the causes and consequences of perceived environmental problems and the growing social conflicts over resources. For example, much has been written about the causes of deforestation and conflicts over forest use, agriculture and land degradation, and the environmental consequences of industrialisation and pollution (including Hafner, 1990; Hirsch, 1993; 1997c; 1997d; Lohmann, 1996; Murray, 1992a; Pinkaew & Rajesh, 1992; Rigg, 1995; Santhat, 1989; Suthawan, Pinkaew, Sutharin, & Chusak, 1996; Taylor, 1994).

Some recent studies highlight the central role of poor, marginalised people, and NGOs, in environmentalism in Thailand (Hirsch, 1997a; 1997c; Pfirmann & Kron, 1992; Pinkaew & Rajesh, 1992; Prudhisana & Maneerat, 1997; Tegbaru, 1997; Tjelland, 1998). Hirsch (1993, 1997c) argues that struggles by poor rural villagers over local resources constitute the main social basis of environmentalism. "Environmentalism in Thailand is largely a response to the depredations made on resources, livelihoods and quality of life by the country's rapid economic development in recent decades..." (Hirsch, 1997b:10). He argues that

grassroots environmentalism has emerged as a combination of two related trends. The first is the impact of Thailand's development path on rural livelihoods, in particular as it has affected peripheral and marginalised people and areas....The second trend is the incorporation of people living in more marginal areas into mainstream political and economic arenas, and the role of environment as a legitimising discourse for their claims over resources (Hirsch, 1997a:25-26).

As Hirsch points out, environmental discourse - multiple and contested as it is - provides ideological means for poor, less powerful villagers to seek to legitimate their claims over land and other resources, and also to find common ground and make

alliances with other social forces such as environmental NGOs. But he sees such alliances between rural groups, other institutions and middle-class NGOs as contingent and transient, involving “a coalescence of diverse social actors that has ultimately proven short-lived” (Hirsch, 1997c:192). In the final analysis, Hirsch sees grassroots environmental action as diverse, fragmented and unorganised, grounded in widespread local conflicts. This is also the impression that his edited volume on environmentalism in Thailand gives us (Hirsch, 1997d). This seems to be because political ecology approaches have focused methodologically on particular perceived environmental problems, such as pollution, deforestation, or have used case studies focusing on specific localities and communities. In this study I will show how the Assembly of the Poor has endeavoured to forge a diverse and scattered array of local struggles into a cohesive and more sustained, long-lasting movement.

From another perspective political ecology has not been very good at explaining the process that takes us from a situation of environmental degradation and/or threats to local livelihoods to concerted collective action and organised protest by affected people. Researchers have focused on how the environment has become a rallying point for grassroots movements and collective action in opposition to domination, exploitation and displacement. By and large, however, they have failed to account for how it is that local people or grassroots groups have been able to overcome the disorganising and atomising effects of industrial development and environmental degradation on the ability of local communities to mobilise together effectively and sustain collective campaigns. In other words, how do we get from the structural causes of ecological grievances to collective agency? Political ecology has largely taken over an old assumption from peasant studies that ‘misery breeds revolt’ (Goodwin & Skocpol, 1994) and translated it into a language of environmental politics: ‘environmental crisis and threats to livelihood breed organised opposition.’

Some recent studies of resistance and collective action by the poor, however, suggest that “there is never a straight line from misery to protest nor a straight historical line from dissent to mobilization” (Fox & Starn, 1997:11). For example, in his study of “everyday forms of peasant resistance”, Scott (1985:246) emphasises the range of obstacles to collective action by poor, rural villagers in Malaysia, including complex local social stratification, fear, repression and “the day-to-day imperative of earning a

living - of household survival". Scott believes that it is the "level of repression that structures the available options" (1985:299). In his work on labour unions in Thailand, Brown (1997:171) argues that industrialisation and rapid economic growth in urban areas have placed economic pressures on workers that undermine their ability to get organised in the first place: "...as rural communities are uprooted and people seek waged work across a range of industries, often employed in small enterprises, the task of establishing and maintaining existing organisations has proven difficult". The other side of this is, as Brown alludes to, social disintegration of rural villages throughout Thailand and their growing dependence on short and long term migration to work outside the local area. The point is, of course, that while environmental degradation or threats to local livelihood arising from large-scale development projects provide rallying points for local opposition, at the same time they further undermine local communities' abilities to mobilise people and resources for organised and sustained opposition.

For such reasons, I believe that it is important to explain how local people move from ecological crisis to organised and collective political action. How, in the face of growing economic insecurity, social disruption and attacks on local resources, in addition to coercive or repressive action by the state, do local people get organised effectively in the first place? How do they move beyond a grounding in local, concrete grievances to building a cohesive national movement, as the Assembly of the Poor has done? How do they mobilise people and resources, and choose the strategies and tactics of their struggle? How do they articulate their struggle and demands in opposition to powerful discourses of "national development" and the claims of the state or business corporations?

Social Movements Theory

In this thesis I draw on a number of theoretical insights and perspectives from the social movements literature to address these questions. Social movements theory has always been concerned with analysing human agency, collective action and social change, and these are also key issues here. In particular, recent theoretical elaborations of the roles of culture and identity, social networks, and the notion of "civil society" as the terrain and target of social movement activity, provide fruitful approaches to understanding and analysing the Assembly of the Poor.

The term “social movement” usually refers to organised, collective action by people sharing common interests or a common identity, and which has the goal of changing the social order (Scott, 1990:6). Beginning in the 1960s, the emergence of what appeared to be radically new forms of collective action and political mobilisation in industrialised nations challenged and transformed the previously dominant modes of analysis (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Johnston, Larana, & Gusfield, 1994). Until that time, social science perspectives on social movements were dominated by functionalism and Marxist theories of class struggle and ideology (Melucci, 1996; Scott, 1990). The rise of student and women’s movements during the 1960s, followed by peace and anti-nuclear movements, environmentalism, gay rights and ethnic autonomy struggles, seemed to explode conventional ways of understanding collective behaviour and social change (Johnston et al., 1994). These “new social movements” appeared to represent radically new political “subjects”, distinct, for instance, from the labour movement, which was the legitimate political subject of social transformation in Marxist theory. They did not seem to be analysable in terms of the class or socio-economic positions of participants and defied neat ideological categorisation in terms of right or left. Moreover, their “grievances and mobilizing factors tend to focus on cultural and symbolic issues that are linked with issues of identity rather than on economic grievances that characterized the working-class movement” (Johnston et al., 1994:7; see also Melucci, 1985). Many of the new movements acted on a deep scepticism and mistrust of conventional channels of political participation and representation, and used strategies of mass mobilisation, nonviolent protest and civil disobedience (Johnston et al., 1994:8).

Research and theoretical engagement with the “new social movements” provoked new theoretical perspectives and fresh conceptions of contemporary movements, their relationships to industrial society and their roles in social change. By the mid-1980s Cohen was able to delineate two main competing theoretical paradigms: strategy perspectives and identity perspectives (Cohen, 1985; see also Cohen & Arato, 1992). Strategy perspectives view social movements as manifestations of social conflict, which emerge as a result of changing social and political opportunities, and access to resources. Analysts drawing on strategy perspectives see collective action as rational and instrumental, and investigate the ways in which movements organise, mobilise people and resources, and deploy political strategies towards social or political change

(Cohen & Arato, 1992). Praphat's (1997a; 1997b; 1998) work on the Assembly of the Poor exemplifies this approach.

The identity paradigm, on the other hand, studies social movements as collective struggles over meanings, culture and identity. This struggle over culture and identity is rarely unconnected with the participants' material conditions, nor do they usually totally reject dominant ideologies. Rather, every group involved in social conflict faces the problem of articulating a collective identity and of struggling to give meanings to their actions. In other words, social and political conflict is often deeply expressive and symbolic. Issues of culture, identity and knowledge as they are expressed and contested within social movements are important, as they reveal new ways in which power is contested by social actors. Material and class bases of social movements remain important, but analysts such as Melucci (1988; 1996) have also focused on questions of identity and collective identity in addressing questions of why people get involved in social movements and how they mobilise as a collective social actor. The reformulation and articulation of a collective identity may be as much a political strategy of resistance and opposition to the state as a means of mobilising people to protest (Castells, 1997).

Cohen (1985) argues that the two distinct paradigms can be regarded as complementary; that both perspectives can usefully inform theoretical analysis of social movements (see also Cohen & Arato, 1992). This marks a recognition among many social movement theorists that, as Scott (1990:5) puts it, "holistic theories of the social world [such as Marxism or functionalism] are untenable in the light of the complexity of the phenomena under consideration". At the same time, the actual novelty and distinctiveness of the so-called "new social movements" has been called into question (Melucci, 1994). As (Scott, 1990) points out, many "new" movements were actually revivals of earlier movements or could be shown to have direct historical links with "old" labour movements. Thus, much recent work draws on a range of theoretical perspectives in order to explore issues of culture and identity, as well as political opportunities and strategies (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Melucci, 1996).

The explosion of writing and theoretical engagement with social movements in the West has also stimulated and influenced work in Third World contexts (for example Escobar

& Alvarez, 1992b; Slater, 1985; Wignaraja, 1993a). Many of the new theoretical questions and issues were taken up and applied, albeit with a recognition of political, social and cultural contexts different from Western countries. Much of the literature dealing with social movements in the Third World explores organised struggles to transform power relations in order to overcome poverty and inequality, and to democratise society. For example, writing from a position of activism and solidarity, Wignaraja (1993b:18-19) argues that social movements are engaged in building “countervailing power to the dominant state power”. Like much political ecology, he views contemporary social movements in the Third World as responding to a deep-seated crisis of dominant approaches to modernisation and development. The resulting social contradictions weaken or undermine the legitimacy of the state and its exercise of power. In response, according to Wignaraja (1993b:4), two themes dominate the struggles of the new movements: “human development and participatory democracy”; that is, demands for socially just and equitable forms of development, and practices of participatory democracy that go beyond the limitations of institutional forms of representative democracy, enabling poor people to become the subjects and agents of their own development.

Similarly, Escobar and Alvarez (1992a) focus particularly on identities and cultural innovation, new forms or strategies of “doing politics”, and new ways of conceptualising and enacting democracy and development. These issues are taken up with renewed emphasis in a recent follow-up volume that stresses cultural politics and political culture (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998b). Similarly, another recent volume, edited by Fox and Starn (1997:3), takes as its specific task a focus on the “ideas, identities, symbols, and strategies” which inform “the cultural politics of social protest” by social movements in both Third World and Western contexts.

Assembling Identity, Mobilising Culture

I begin this chapter with a folk song performed in the midst of a street protest to signal an approach to the Assembly of the Poor that pays close attention to identity, culture and the symbolic dimensions of protest, power and political struggle. Indeed, questions of how the movement socially constructs collective identity and establishes solidarity as a basis for struggle and protest, and deploys culture strategically, run through many of the chapters of this thesis. As Castells (1997:8) points out, the formation of collective

identity is always involved when subordinated people attempt to redefine their position in society and change the social order. Similarly, Jordan and Weedon argue that collective identities are formed in the process of struggle, and represent “sites of resistance”:

Just as group domination has its cultural dimensions, so *resistance to domination* must also be rooted in culture and experience, at least, if it is to be successful.... [F]or marginalized and oppressed groups, the construction of new and resistant identities is a key dimension of a wider political struggle to transform society (1995:5-6, emphasis in original).

Hence, the formation and articulation of identity constitutes a foundation for collective action.

Gupta and Ferguson (1997) explore the relations between place, identity and resistance, and this would seem to be a useful theme to investigate in environmental movements. ‘Place’, as Barfield (1997:360) notes, is “a space made meaningful by human occupation or appropriation and is a cultural concept fundamental to describing human beings’ relations with their environment”. Political ecology, however, has largely ignored the role of place or environment in the social construction of identity. For many of the groups making up the Assembly of the Poor, claims about their relations to their dwelling place and local environment constitute both a rallying point for collective opposition and a political claim of authenticity and legitimacy for their grievances and political struggle.

As I explore throughout this thesis, most of the groups in the Assembly articulate a *locally-grounded* identity that is linked with their particular claims about a way of life faced with destruction by ‘development’. As I will argue, a faithfulness to the material local grievances of its diverse membership constitutes one of the strengths of the Assembly and helps explain its ability to mobilise large numbers of people to protest. But this brings us to the problem of how localisation is transcended in building a national movement (Esteva & Prakash, 1992). How does the Assembly construct a unifying identity and culture of solidarity (Fantasia, 1988), which at the same time integrates *and* gives validity to a large number of locally-based identities? A concern with identity questions how it is constituted, negotiated and transformed, problematises labels and categories such as “the Poor”, “the people” and “the grassroots” that the Assembly uses in representing itself and seeking legitimacy for political actions. At one

very basic level the Assembly fights to gain recognition of its own autonomous agency with the “*right to have rights*” and to make claims on the state (Dagnino, 1998:50). Furthermore, as I show below, the position and identity of NGO activists in the Assembly reveals tensions and contradictions that have not been resolved.

The articulation of identity illuminates an aspect of the discursive and symbolic elaboration of the Assembly’s political struggles. Social movements and post-Marxist theorists have recognised that for every material conflict there may be many possible ways of making it meaningful and articulating it with available discourses and ideologies in the process of struggle (Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Laclau and Mouffe (1985:168) argue that the “forms of articulation of an antagonism, therefore, far from being predetermined, are the result of a hegemonic struggle”. In this case the Assembly of the Poor draws on environmental discourse to help make its conflicts and grievances meaningful in a way that can oppose development practice but also attack the hegemony of industrial development. As Hirsch argues, environmentalism offers a legitimising discourse for local people’s claims over resources (1997a; 1997c). But, as I demonstrate in this study, the Assembly cannot be understood solely as an expression of environmental conflict. It links its struggles with discourses of sustainable development, community rights, participation and democratic reform. Thus, the movement challenges not just development policy and practice but also the dominant political culture.

Direct Action and Protest

As Scott (1990:6) writes, social movements are often distinguished from other collective actors, such as political parties, “in that they have mass mobilization, or the threat of mobilization, as their prime source of social sanction, and hence of power” (see also Marx & McAdam, 1994). In this study I pay particular attention to protest, the social processes underlying it and the meanings it expresses. I show that the Assembly’s mass demonstrations should not be seen simply as an instrumental political strategy; they do not simply mean ‘power in numbers’. The Assembly’s demonstrations dramatise conflict and make it visible while also forcing open discursive spaces and political opportunities to express the language of community and democracy to support their demands and stake their claims to be seen as a legitimate political actor with justifiable grievances (see Alvarez et al., 1998b:20). In other words, as Melucci

(1998:425) argues, protests seek to express demands to the state but also involve a struggle over the very meanings of collective action. Demonstrations express a social critique about the usually unseen impacts of 'development' on poor and marginalised people and the responsibilities of the state to see that social justice is done.

Furthermore, the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the Assembly can be illustrated most forcefully in the movement's protest rallies. The Assembly's protests carry expressive and symbolic meanings that cannot be separated from their political power. They are sites for the social construction of identity and solidarity, the deployment of culture and cultural practices for political purposes, and the assertion of the "voice of the poor". From the perspective of the villagers and NGO activists, participation in rallies and protests provides experience through which their sense of solidarity and collective political agency and potential - their political culture - is transformed.

Civil Society, Participation and Hegemony

Studies of social movements throughout the world have challenged our ideas about the domains and targets of political struggle, about how power relations are contested and transformed. The state is no longer the sole, or in some cases even the major, antagonist and target of action. Instead, the concept of "civil society" is increasingly being brought to bear to analyse the social domains and impacts of social movements, grassroots organisations and NGOs (in, for example, Cohen & Arato, 1992; Dagnino, 1998; Scott, 1990).

"Civil society" is an ambiguous and contested concept. In its simplest formulation it refers to everyday social life which is independent from the direct control of the state (Hindess, 1996). More incisively, the civil society concept is used to analyse the social and political contexts in which people are able to act collectively to challenge or influence state power. Thus, in much of the literature, civil society means a domain in which people are free to form independent and autonomous associations to mediate with the state and pursue their political goals (for example Fisher, 1998:11-12). A spatial metaphor for conceptualising and defining civil society prevails throughout much of the political science literature. For example, Hewison (1997:10) defines civil society as an "autonomous sphere of political space in which 'political forces representing constellations of interests in society have contested state power' " (see also Rodan,

1996:28).

Fisher (1998) maintains that NGOs (including professional development agencies and grassroots organisations) represent the foremost agents strengthening and democratising civil society in most of the Third World. She argues that when previously marginalised people organise together into associations they increase their power to influence the state and their collective capacity to address their own problems. Associations that promote internal participatory democracy further “empower” themselves and enhance their organisational autonomy. Moreover, Fisher argues that through their growing tendency towards building NGO networks and relationships with other sectors of civil society, such as churches and business corporations, they are increasing their ability to mobilise resources and influence powerful civil institutions. Therefore, considering the rapid proliferation in the sheer numbers of NGOs during the previous two decades, especially those pursuing advocacy for the political rights and livelihood security of the poor, Fisher concludes that they represent the “vanguard of civil society” in developing countries (1998:12). Thus, this approach to civil society celebrates it as the “political space” in which people organise autonomously and develop their collective capacities and power to influence the state. It suggests a social domain in which to develop participatory and democratic institutions and push back the power and domination of authoritarian states.

A rather different conception of civil society, that draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci, has also become influential in the approaches of many activists and academics. Gramsci’s contribution to modern conceptions of civil society is his analysis of how dominant groups controlling the state gained the consent of the majority of the population without the use of force or coercion (1971:12). Gramsci conceives of civil society as the domain of the contestation of hegemony. He does write about civil society as consisting of a multiplicity of private associations and organisations, but sees the dominant forms of these as serving the state, not opposing it: “one or more [association] predominates relatively or absolutely - constituting the hegemonic apparatus of one social group over the rest of the population (or civil society)” (Gramsci, 1971:264-5). “Hegemony” means the ideological and cultural process through which society is organised and the consent of the majority attained:

The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population

to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production (Gramsci, 1971:12).

Through his concept of hegemony, Gramsci highlights the ideological and cultural dimensions of domination and the exercise of power in civil society. Ideologies, he writes, "'organise' human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc" (Gramsci, 1971:377). Hegemony, in Gramsci's formulation, is not a totalising process. As Raymond Williams (1977) writes, hegemony is a lived process which, because embedded in unequal social relations, is also constantly resisted and challenged. Hegemony, in Williams' interpretation,

sees the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living - not only of political and economic activity, nor only of manifest social activity, but of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense (1977:110).

Thus, such theoretical formulations propose that the political consciousness *and* identities of subordinated groups are shaped by hegemonic processes. 'Political consciousness' here refers to the subjective experiences and knowledge of actors, the meanings they give to their social position, and the ways in which they understand their political interests and the purposes of collective action. Hegemony, in other words, shapes 'political subjects', as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Dagnino (1998) have argued. Some commentators have pointed to the similarities between these reformulations of Gramscian theory and Foucault's analysis of the operation of power and discourse in constitution of human subjectivity (see Smart, 1983; Torfing, 1999). For example, in an often-quoted passage Foucault wrote

There are two meanings of the word *subject*... subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to (Foucault 1982, quoted in Rabinow, 1984:21).

Thus, Gramsci and his successors see civil society as a terrain of struggle over hegemony and his work suggests a new approach to social transformation in which the

power of the state could be overturned by a cultural and ideological struggle for institutions in civil society, rather than a direct assault on the state (Dagnino, 1998; Strinati, 1995; Williams, 1977). Oppositional or 'counter-hegemonic' forces must be based in emergent forms of political consciousness and identities able to bring people together for collective action. As hegemony operates in the practical, day to day lives of people, then the transformation of political consciousness must also begin from there. These ideas have had a profound impact on activists and academics of the Left in many parts of the Third World, especially since the early 1980s, as Dagnino (1998) shows in Latin America. The Marxist idea of revolution has been largely replaced by struggles to democratise civil society as a means of opposition to authoritarian states (Dagnino, 1998).

As we will see in this study, both of these conceptions of civil society have proved influential in the Thai NGO sector and among activists and academics working with the Assembly of the Poor. That is, activists see civil society as the political space in which people get organised and build networks to increase their collective capacities to influence the state, but also in terms of a constant cultural and ideological struggle over the political consciousness of the poor.

Social Networks in Everyday Life

In social movements theory there has been a growing recognition of the importance of social networks submerged in everyday life as the basis of social movements (for instance, Alvarez, 1997; 1985; Melucci, 1988). That is, social movement events such as protests, assemblies or meetings are *occasional*; at other times people go about their daily lives and movements are sustained by informal, interpersonal networks and cultural practices. For example, in 1997 after the Assembly's protest in Bangkok had dispersed, I spent several months visiting Assembly members in their home villages in regional areas. Of course I usually found them working their rice fields, tending their cash crops or with their families; there was little to distinguish them from their neighbours who had not joined the movement. But what gradually appeared to me was a thriving social network of communication and organisation which hinged on village level organisers and NGO activists. Religious events such as merit-making festivals and funerals provided opportunities for the activists to reinforce informal ties and their solidarity with local cultural traditions. But this is not to argue that the daily lives of

participants were not transformed in certain ways through their participation in these networks (see especially Chapters 5 and 7).

The structural position of NGO activists in movement networks, and their cultural capital of education and literacy skills, means that they have a great deal of influence and power in the movement, which they nevertheless tend to down-play considerably in public forums. As Jelin (1998) and Alvarez (1998) discuss, this has become a controversial issue in some recent Third World social movement literature. Indeed, some commentators on the Thai context, such as Rigg (1994) and Tjelland (1995) argue that NGOs do little more than incorporate villagers into unequal patron-client relations with little real opportunities for grassroots democracy or empowerment. In this study I explore and analyse the relationships between the NGO activists and villagers in the Assembly (particularly in Chapters 5 and 7). There have been very few ethnographic explorations of villager-NGO relations in the literature, and the detailed ethnographic accounts provide important insights.

The Assembly of the Poor as a Social Movement

As Melucci stresses, the large range of empirical phenomena encompassed by the label social movement “are made up of multiple motivations, relations, and orientations” (1998:424). Therefore, the definitions and the analytic perspectives used will shape interpretations and understandings of movements (Melucci, 1996; 1998). In the previous sections I have briefly outlined the theoretical contexts of political ecology and social movements theory and some of the theoretical questions which they raise that underlie my approach in this thesis.

Thai political scientists Praphat Pintoptaeng (1997a; 1997b; 1998) and Suthy Prasartset (1997) have applied the analytical lens of social movements theory in their approaches to the Assembly of the Poor. Suthy (1997:3-4), in a short article, argues that the Assembly enacts new forms of political contention that he contrasts with “old social movements” such as peasant or workers’ organisations that campaign on the narrow economic interests of their members. What distinguishes the Assembly from such “old” movements, in his analysis, is its rejection of party politics as an arena of political contestation, and its articulation of broad social issues such as human rights, democracy and environmentalism. In Suthy’s (1997:5) view, the Assembly represents a “counter-

hegemonic movement” contesting “hegemonic ideas of development” (*kanphatthana krasae lak*).

Praphat’s work, however, presents the most detailed, in-depth analysis of the Assembly of the Poor so far (1997a; 1997b; 1998). He mainly draws on the political strategy perspective. In his recent book about the Assembly he describes the material grievances which motivated people to join, the organisational structure of the movement, the context of political and social opportunities in which it emerged, political strategies and methods of mobilising people and resources for protest, and state responses (Praphat, 1998).

This thesis complements Praphat’s work. Certainly, the scope of my study is broader, as he focuses mainly on the Assembly during its 1997 protest rally, whereas I follow the structure of the movement back to locally-based villagers’ organisations and track Assembly activities outside of times of mass mobilisation in protest. Furthermore, my ethnographic approach has led me to pay greater attention to identity and culture, and investigate the experiences and understandings of ordinary villagers, as well as villagers’ leaders and NGO activists in the movement.

One final point about social movement theory needs to be made. ‘Social movement’ encompasses not just an analytical category for academic analysis, but also a complex discourse disseminated, interpreted and applied reflexively in real situations by activists. Political activists in the Assembly describe it as a social movement precisely because that is what they aspire to: organised, broad-based collective action for social change and democratisation of Thai society. For example, a publicity leaflet released during the 1997 protest in Bangkok declares that, “Protest rallies... have taught the people that we should not struggle alone. We must create a democratic social movement” (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h). As Cohen and Arato (1992:499) point out, political strategy approaches may have particular appeal and practical application for political activists, as they most closely coincide with issues facing a movement organiser aiming to mobilise people and resources in a campaign. What becomes relevant and interesting then is how different participants understand and put the idea of social movement into the practice.

Following the People: Anthropological Perspectives and Ethnographic Methods

Anthropology's emphasis on the experiences and culture of local people and subordinated groups potentially has an enormous contribution to make to the study of social movements. One anthropologist who has consistently argued for an ethnographic engagement with social movements is Arturo Escobar. In *Encountering Development*, he argues for an "anthropology of modernity [which] would rely on ethnographic approaches that look at social forms as produced by historical practices combining knowledge and power; it would seek to examine how truth claims are related to practices and symbols that produce and regulate social life" (Escobar, 1995a:12). In other words, he advocates engagement in the deconstruction and critique of development discourse. This project is now under way within anthropology (Cheater, 1999; Escobar, 1995a; Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Grillo, 1997). Furthermore, Escobar argues for an anthropological engagement with contemporary social movements in the Third World, many of which arise out of economic and environmental crises and challenge dominant ideas of modernity and development. He argues that, because contemporary social movements can be seen as *cultural* struggles over the very definitions of development, nature and society, anthropology can make important contributions (Escobar, 1992; 1995a). Indeed, this is illustrated in the contributions by several anthropologists to a recent edited volume exploring cultural politics and political culture in Latin American social movements (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998a).

Gledhill also advocates a political anthropology of social movements. Like Escobar he emphasises issues of culture and power for anthropological investigation:

A focus on social movements encourages us to look at the politics of culture as a process by which groups in 'society' construct or reconstruct identities for themselves in their struggles and negotiations with both dominant groups and the state (Gledhill, 1994:194).

He points out that ethnographic fieldwork "enables anthropologists to examine processes which are often ignored by political scientists and sociologists working with survey techniques and secondary sources" (8). These processes include the way power relations are enacted and experienced at the local level by villagers and other social actors as part of daily life. Moreover, ethnographic approaches to specific social contexts need to be combined with other kinds of data. As Gledhill writes, "It does not detract from the importance of fieldwork in any way to argue that it must be

complimented by other types of methodologies and data and that anthropologists should analyse structures, organisations and systems of relationships beyond the local level” (1994:8).

The ethnographic approach which I have taken, and which grew out of my interest in the political activity of rural villagers, has led me to focus on the experience and perspectives of villagers and NGO activists in the Assembly of the Poor, and their roles in the social construction of collective action and protest. But doing ethnographic fieldwork with participants of a protest movement like the Assembly of the Poor presented particular practical and methodological problems.

The fieldwork and research on which this thesis is based were to a large extent fortuitous, as I initially began with a research proposal to investigate *local* environmental conflicts along the Chi-Mun River system in Northeast Thailand (see Map 1). I had previously spent eighteen months living in Northeast Thailand, including ten months in rural villages conducting ethnographic fieldwork for my Masters Degree on “Village Schools and Rural Development” (Missingham, 1994; 1997) and accompanying my partner during her doctoral research on women’s health (Whittaker, 1995). When I arrived in Thailand in September 1996 I did not expect to be spending long periods of time sitting among a crowd of protesters on a hot, dusty street in Bangkok. I had planned to stay for an extended time in two local communities on the Chi-Mun River, much like many previous village-based studies in Thailand (Chayan, 1993).

During a total of thirteen months fieldwork in Thailand from September 1996 to March 1997, and again from May to November 1997, I was affiliated with the Research and Development Institute (RDI) of Khon Kaen University in the Northeast. Consequently, my home base was located in Khon Kaen but, as I explain below, I spent long periods of time in two other fieldsites, the Mun River in Ubon Ratchathani Province, and in Bangkok. In November 1996 I visited the Mun River Villagers’ Centre in Ubon Ratchathani Province to introduce myself to the NGO workers and villagers based there, and to explain my desire to do fieldwork in a local village. I proposed to study the social effects of the Pak Mun Dam, which had been completed in mid-1994, and the activities of the Mun River villagers’ organisation and their local NGO supporters. They readily

agreed to cooperate, but events quickly overtook my original plans. I knew a little about the Assembly of the Poor protests earlier that year, and so asked about Mun River villagers' involvement. Noting my interest, the NGO activists invited me to an upcoming regional meeting of the Assembly a few weeks later. At that meeting, hundreds of villagers' representatives from throughout the Northeast voted to protest again in Bangkok if the government failed to respond to their petition (Fieldnotes, 15-12-1997, Khong Jiam).

So it happened that I found myself in the fortunate position of observing members of the Assembly of the Poor preparing for a major campaign and protest, while at the same time beginning to establish relationships and friendships with some Mun River villagers and NGO activists who were to play important roles in that protest. If I wanted to study the Mun River villagers' political action I had to take the Assembly into account, and if I wanted to research the Assembly ethnographically, then *within* the Mun River villagers' organisation was an excellent place to start. The Assembly is too large and diverse to study ethnographically as a whole. It encompasses groups from over one hundred different localities from every region of the country (see Chapter 3). Therefore, I had to be strategic. I believe that the ethnographic case studies presented here give a depth to our understanding of the Assembly that a broader account would lack.

While I spent a lot of time with Mun River villagers and their leaders, this is not simply a study of one group within the movement, and I tried to systematically employ strategies to extend the boundaries of the ethnography. The research quickly became what Marcus (1995) calls "multi-sited ethnography". I chose to "follow the people" and to "follow the conflict" (Marcus, 1995:106-110). In doing so, I worked outwards, so to speak, from the villagers and NGO activists I already knew. The protest rally is a good example. When I first arrived there two days after the demonstration began, I first joined Panya Tongyu, whom I already knew, and his family and friends. They introduced me to dozens of others from the Mun River group who were keen to talk with me and grant me interviews. Panya's support and assistance proved to be crucial. He was an organiser for his own community and a delegate for the Mun River Villagers' Organisation. Through Panya I gained access to 'internal' meetings of the Assembly's collective leadership, and negotiation meetings with government representatives. Mun River villagers' leaders introduced me to delegates from other local groups, and I

gradually developed a network of people throughout the protest site. Some individuals and groups were very suspicious of me at first, but I found that most protesters were keen to tell their stories, even to foreign researchers, which they saw as another channel to disseminate their struggle.

This networking continued later, after the protest concluded and the villagers returned to their homes. On the invitation of the NGO workers who lived and worked there, I lived for a total of four months at the Mun River Villagers' Centre in Pha Pratu Thong village on the edge of Pak Mun Dam. This provided a convenient base for visits to dozens of villages along the river. But I soon discovered that the Villagers' Centre acted as a coordinating centre for a whole network of local groups in the province who had joined the Assembly of the Poor. Travelling with the NGO activists I visited many of these groups, including communities on the nearby Sirinthorn Dam, Chong Mek on the border with Laos, and villages on the Dorm Yai River several hours drive away (see Maps 1 and 2). I also spent several months in Bangkok, particularly during the extended protest rally early in 1997, but also including regular visits during the rest of 1997 for meetings and seminars involving Assembly representatives, visits to the Assembly secretarial office and interviews. Thus, the "field" became an interlocking network of politically and socially-constructed locations where certain kinds of knowledge about the Assembly were accessible.

The rest of the time I was mainly based in Khon Kaen, where I undertook ethnographic research with two groups of villagers on the Nam Pong River who did not join the Assembly of the Poor. This ethnographic data is not presented in detail in this thesis because of space constraints, but it provided important background material on local organisation, campaign and protest strategies, and insights into why some groups participated in the movement and others did not. The town of Khon Kaen is also a coordinating centre for NGO activity and I made regular visits to NGO offices for seminars, interviews and NGO publications and documents.

Within these various sites I employed the tools of an ethnographer - participant observation, conversations and informal interviews with informants, formal recorded interviews. I participated in and observed literally dozens of meetings, from the local level to the national level, and negotiation meetings with government representatives.

Altogether I interviewed sixty-nine individual villagers, including community leaders and ordinary 'rank and file' members of the Assembly. I also formally interviewed twenty-one NGO activists involved at various levels in the Assembly, who also engaged in ongoing and informative discussions with me during the course of fieldwork. From December 1996 to May 1997 I employed an assistant, Mr. Suwit Wongpom, who helped in all aspects of the research, especially in the conduct and transcription of interviews in Lao. All interviews began with an offer of confidentiality and anonymity, and subsequently most participants indicated a preference that their real names not be used in the final written thesis. Therefore, I have used pseudonyms for all participants in the research, except where indicated or when well-known public figures are mentioned.

Representing the Assembly

One month after the Assembly's protest rally dispersed, early in June 1997, I visited Panya Tongyu, in his home beside the Mun River. When I arrived he was busy cooking bamboo shoots that he had collected with his wife the night before in a big square tin over a charcoal stove. We sat upstairs in his wooden house which was shaded by the green and fertile papaya, custard apple and kapok trees surrounding it. I could see the swollen, muddy river only thirty metres away through the trees. We talked about the protest and Panya dug out up the battered school exercise book in which he had recorded information and scribbled out the songs he composed during the rally. Now he sang several of his *mo lam* songs again, unaccompanied this time, while I recorded them.

I asked Panya what the Assembly of the Poor had been doing for the past month or so. As he was a delegate in the Mun River villagers' negotiating team, I hoped that he would give me details of recent meetings with the government. But he interpreted my question at a different, more literal level. "The Assembly of the Poor have returned to their homes and their families. They have been preparing their fields and planting their rice. Working their uplands cash crops," he replied. This summed up what he and his wife, and most of the members of the Mun River villagers' organisation were doing, and it reminded me forcibly that even though they had returned to their ordinary, day to day lives they remained the Assembly of the Poor. This study gives an account of the Assembly of the Poor that sheds light on these different dimensions of the movement - the intense experience of high-profile public demonstrations, the day to day life of

people back in their home villages and the networks which connect them. In focusing on the experiences, knowledge and understandings of the social actors whose words and practice actually constitute the Assembly, I often present villagers' and activists' own words (in translation) in order to better explore their understandings of the Assembly, their role and part in it, and the meanings they ascribe to their political struggles.

During ethnographic fieldwork it is difficult not to form personal commitments and feelings of obligation with informants and subjects of one's research (Gledhill, 1994). In this thesis I do not pretend to be a "objective" observer without feelings of personal commitment and support for members of the Assembly and their campaign goals. Indeed, I would not have been able to gain access and entry to the groups that I worked with in the Assembly without holding sympathy and expressing support for their struggle. Nevertheless, I hope that I have been able to step back from an overly-romantic representation of the Assembly of the Poor in this study and give an account that includes the tensions, contradictions and conflicts within the movement.

To sum up, this study presents an ethnographic account of the Assembly of the Poor, informed by theoretical perspectives from political ecology and social movements literature. In the next chapter I briefly describe the historical background of the Assembly in order to explain the origins of the movement.

In chapter 3 I present a broad overview of the Assembly and discuss how it has been able to overcome a fragmenting and localising impetus to combine a large number of diverse, locally-grounded conflicts into a country-wide movement able to campaign and negotiate at a national level.

From a 'big picture' overview of the movement I then turn to a detailed ethnographic account of the origins and activities of one particular organisation that has taken a leading role in the Assembly of the Poor. Chapter 4 analyses the relationships between development, environmental change and grassroots collective action through a case study of the emergence of the Mun River Villagers' Committee and its campaign against the Pak Mun Dam in Northeast Thailand. This is the story that Panya Tongyu introduces so eloquently at the beginning of this chapter.

In Chapter 5 I turn my attention to the NGO activists within the Assembly. While there has been a large amount written about development and environmental NGOs in Thailand, there is, as yet, very little written about the actual people who work within these organisations. These activists play a key role in building and sustaining the networks which constitute the Assembly.

It is well-managed villagers' organisations, grounded in local problems, on the one hand, together with well-coordinated networks linking and supporting them, on the other, that enable the Assembly to mobilise large numbers of people to mount sustained, mass protest. Chapter 6 presents an ethnographic account of the Assembly's ninety-nine day protest rally in 1997. I explore the processes underlying mass mobilisation and the social construction of protest, the complex political meanings expressed by the demonstration and ways in which the experience transforms the political consciousness of participants.

I address issues of participation, democracy and civil society in Chapter 7. I describe how these concepts are put into practice within the organisations and networks which constitute the Assembly. It endeavours to enact a "culture of equality" which sustains collective leadership and promotes grassroots democracy within the movement. Nevertheless, a handful of NGO activists exert power and influence within these processes which contradict the Assembly's democratic ideology.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I consider the multiple outcomes of the Assembly's activities in the light of the social and political processes described in the previous chapters. I return to the key issues posed in the introduction and address the extent to which the Assembly of the Poor has been able to transform unequal relations of power to the benefit of its grassroots members.



Map 1. Map of Thailand and its regions.



Photograph 1. The main stage in the Assembly of the Poor's protest rally. The stage backdrop says "Assembly of the Poor demands what was promised [rally no.] 2".



Photograph 2. One night during the Assembly of the Poor protest. A group of Northeastern villagers perform an impromptu *mor lam* to entertain themselves. The bamboo wind instrument is a *khaen* (mentioned on page 2).

The Assembly of the Poor was born when the "Mun River Declaration" was made on 10-15 December 1995 at Thammasat University and Khong Jiam, Ubon Ratchathani Province by representatives of different local communities who have suffered the consequences of development... that have arisen in the middle of the war over natural resources, soil, water, forest, mineral sources, fisheries etc, between the state, business and villagers living in local communities in both the countryside and the city (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h, my translation).

This chapter traces the historical origins of the Assembly of the Poor. As the quote above states, the Assembly was founded during a conference of villagers' and NGO delegates in December 1995. It announced its birth with the "Mun River Declaration" and a protest at the ASEAN Summit then convening in Bangkok. In this chapter I present a context for understanding the Assembly and the ethnographic accounts presented later. Here I argue that there are three main strands to the historical background of the Assembly.

First, since the early 1960s, economic development and industrialisation have transformed Thailand's economy and social structure, undermining the importance and security of the agricultural sector, exacerbating economic inequality and bringing about new forms of exploitation. Development engendered a social and environmental crisis in the countryside as the state and capital increasingly moved to acquire and exploit rural environmental resources such as land, forests and rivers, especially since the early 1980s.

Second, Thailand has a long history of rural resistance and collective struggle against subordination and exploitation. It is difficult to present a cohesive account of rural opposition as it has largely been a suppressed history, based in sporadic and geographically dispersed events. Nevertheless, I believe that the Assembly needs to be seen against that historical context in order to remind us of the agency of the rural poor in a long history of struggles to improve their position in Thai society.

Third, by the early 1970s economic growth and development had produced a growing

and diverse middle class, which sustained a movement of political activism opposing elite power, and struggling for social and political reform. Much of the energy of this middle class political activism has been channelled through the NGO movement since the early 1980s. These three trends converged in the rural development work of NGOs as activists promoted organisation and “alternative development” by rural villagers in response to poverty and environmental threats to livelihood. The result has been a decade of rural organising, political activism and protest such as has never before been seen in Thailand.

Economic Development and its Consequences

Rapid economic growth and industrialisation since the 1960s have changed the structure of the Thai economy in terms of the importance of agriculture in GDP and the relative wealth and income of the city and village. Up until 1960, Thai society was primarily based on an agricultural economy, with about 90 per cent of the workforce engaged in agriculture and contributing about half of the national income (Medhi, 1995b:3; Warr, 1993). Rice production dominated, with over 80 per cent of cultivated land used to cultivate rice (Falkus, 1995). Under the military dictatorship of Sarit Thanarat (Prime Minister from 1958 to 1963) the government set the country on a path of industrialisation and economic growth.

Sarit began promoting development (*kanphatthana*) as “both an economic goal to be pursued and an ideology on which the legitimacy of the government was based” (Keyes, 1989:76). The shift towards a greater development effort in regional Thailand was largely motivated by concerns of the political leaders that the relative underdevelopment and poverty in rural areas, particularly the Northeast, would become a source of rebellion and a threat to the security of the state (Demaine, 1986; Keyes, 1967). “Development” became a key strategy of ideological, political and economic incorporation of marginal communities into the nation-state. Following the advice of the World Bank, his government began investing large amounts in public infrastructure and promoting private sector investment in manufacturing (Warr, 1993). The extension of economic infrastructure and the provision of schools, health centres and administrative structures served to incorporate regional populations into the nation-state and capitalist economy (Hirsch, 1990), but also enabled the exploitation by the centre of the profits of rural production and “the transfer of wealth from the countryside to the city” (Demaine,

1986:97).

From 1961 development policy was officially guided by a series of National Economic and Social Development Plans drawn up by the National Economic and Social Development Board in the Office of the Prime Minister. Industrialisation was encouraged with import substitution policies during the 1960s, followed by a turn towards promotion of export-oriented manufacturing from the early 1970s (Falkus, 1995). These policies led to a period of rapid economic growth and industrialisation from the mid-1980s (Falkus, 1995) that continued until the economic downturn and crisis that struck in 1997.

During the 1960s economic growth, albeit highly inequitable, rapidly changed the structure of Thai society, while political power remained concentrated in the hands of the top echelons of the military and civil bureaucracy, in collusion with a small economic elite (Girling, 1981). The economy and social structure became increasingly diverse and economically differentiated. Cities and urban centres grew dramatically. A sizeable industrial working class appeared, but was kept disciplined under a suppressive regime of labour laws and state force (Girling, 1981).

Development policies, however, favoured Bangkok at the expense of the rural sector, and large-scale agricultural industry at the expense of small-scale farmers and peasants (Bello, Cunningham, & Poh, 1998:133-146). While economic and industrial development brought about a declining poverty incidence overall, inequality in income distribution grew (Pranee, 1995). Pranee reports that while there was a decline in poverty during the period of economic development, by 1988 21.2 per cent of the population still lived in poverty, and 89 per cent of those lived in rural villages and were mainly farmers or farm labourers (1995:224). By 1990, whereas agriculture's share of GDP had dropped to about 11%, it still engaged over 60% of the work force (Warr, 1993). While rice and agricultural production continued to grow in absolute terms, the agricultural sector declined relative to manufacturing, and rural production actually helped finance industrial investment and economic growth in Bangkok (Dixon, 1995; Medhi, 1995a). Although agriculture remained the foundation of economic growth until about 1980, the rice premium, a form of taxation, kept the domestic price artificially low and hence "depressed the income of rice farmers, kept the cost of living down for

urban dwellers (and thereby the cost of labour)" (Dixon, 1995:50). Rice was finally freed from government intervention with the lifting of the rice export tax in 1990 (Medhi, 1995a).

The result has been increasing economic inequalities between urban and rural Thailand. Large scale commercial rice production for the international market expanded in the Central Plains (Keyes, 1989:156-157). There, and in the North, peasant landlessness and tenancy has increased (Turton, 1978). Isan (as the Northeast region is called) has suffered the greatest relative deprivation, remaining the poorest region with the greatest incidence of poverty (Keyes, 1989; Medhi, 1995a). Production in Isan remains largely in the hands of family production units cultivating relatively small plots, primarily for subsistence. Rice production has grown steadily in the region but mainly because rapid population growth resulted in the expansion of settlement for the clearing and cultivation of new land, usually forest areas. This uneven development has led to a growing dependence on short and long term migration from rural villages to Bangkok and other areas to make up for economic hardship at home and meet the demand for low-paid unskilled labour in the city (Lightfoot, Fuller, & Peerasit, 1983). For example, Sanitsuda (1990:21) estimated that "an average of two million [Isan] people leave their homes each year to look for work elsewhere", mainly in Bangkok's growing manufacturing and service industries.

Coupled with these structural changes in the economy, industrial development has resulted in a growing demand for natural resources. While the economic profits of agricultural expansion and concomitant deforestation mainly went to fund economic growth and industrialisation in Bangkok, rural Thailand has been left with the ecological costs of deforestation, soil degradation and industrial pollution.

Thailand's forests have disappeared rapidly during the last few decades. Feeny (1988) estimates that at the turn of the century about 70% of Thailand was covered by mature forest. By 1961 this had been reduced to 53%, and by the late 1980s less than 29% of the country was forested (Anat, Dhira, Elkinton, & Phaitoon, 1988; Potter, 1993). Official figures from the Forestry Department are considerably higher than the estimates of NGOs and environmentalists, who place the present forest coverage as low as 15%, and the figure is still declining (Hirsch, 1993:24; Lohmann, 1993). The causes are many

and complex, including population growth and the expansion of settlement and cultivation, the postwar extension of regional infrastructure which facilitated economic incorporation, postwar economic growth and spread of cash crops, logging and national security programs (Hafner, 1990; Hirsch, 1993).

Changing state land and forest management policies have also contributed to deforestation and rural conflicts over land and resource rights (Hirsch, 1993). From the mid-1950s through to the mid-1970s state forest policies reflected a growing concern about deforestation, but in practice the state mostly supported continued agricultural expansion and forest exploitation because of the huge economic returns these brought. During the period of forest-based communist insurgency from 1960 to the early 1980s, the military encouraged settlement and clearing of marginal forest land in order to counter communist occupation of the forest (Lohmann, 1993). When the insurgency effectively ended in the early 1980s it was estimated that 7.2 million people occupied land classified as forest reserve throughout Thailand (Pasuk, 1994:35).

From the late 1970s the state's policies turned towards a much more active and aggressive assertion of control of classified forest, resettlement of forest settlers and restriction of access, and enforcement of "reforestation" policies and programs that have continued to the present day (Taylor, 1994). This change in policy seems to have been motivated by several factors, including rising concern both nationally and internationally about the environmental effects of deforestation, and the decline of the forest-based communist insurgency in the early 1980s. But perhaps most importantly, state agencies and powerful business interests have increasingly moved to appropriate land, forests and other natural resources to support industrialisation.

Apart from the impacts of state forest management policies, dam construction has also transformed riverine environments in rural Thailand, displaced hundreds of thousands of villagers and affected the livelihoods of many times that number. Large dams have faced controversy and public opposition throughout the country virtually since the dam building program began, but during the 1980s and '90s conflicts and confrontations over the use and development of water resources and riverine environments have acquired a high profile. Large dams have been justified as 'dual purpose' to supply both irrigation water and hydroelectric power. Completed dams, however, have often failed

to live up to projected outputs of either electricity or irrigation water (Nart & Poonsab, 1984). Most electric power generated by these dams services urban and industrial centres. In many cases, upon completion of hydroelectric dams, construction of irrigation infrastructure has been given low priority and lags far behind. By 1994 in the Northeast alone ten major dams had been constructed, extensive farmland and forests destroyed and fisheries degraded, and over 100,000 people had been displaced, many with little or no compensation (*Thai Development Newsletter* 25, 1994:51-55).

It is in this context of economic development, structural change and environmental degradation that the recent history of rural resistance and organised opposition needs to be seen. The brief review of the economic and environmental impacts of the development era on rural villagers is not meant to imply that village life and livelihood were any easier before that time. Rural society and economy in Thailand have always been based on inequality and exploitation of the labour and agricultural production of poor peasants (Turton, 1978; 1984). The era of economic development and industrialisation, however, has brought new forms of inequality and exploitation, and hence new forms of grievances to motivate collective resistance.

Rural Resistance and Organised Opposition

Until fairly recently the ruling elite has ruthlessly suppressed any form of autonomous peasants' political organisation. As Pasuk and Baker (1995:72) note, rural villagers' main strategy of resistance to domination and exploitation has been evasion. Nevertheless, Thailand has a long history of peasant protest and organised rebellion, but until the 1960s peasant mobilisation had been largely sporadic and short-lived. Turton (1987:36) argues that

Prior to 1974 there had been many instances of peasant protest and mobilization on issues of agricultural production and livelihood. By comparison with the PFT these protests had limited and localized aims, a less organized structure, and were likely to be couched in less challenging, more deferential terms. Often such protests involved the mass petition of bureaucratic authorities... Since the farmers had no organizational support, governments were often able to divert and coopt such movements...

Morell and Chai-anan present a similar picture: "Unorganized and scattered, traditionally most [peasants] have been politically apathetic, tending to accept their misfortune and poverty as their inescapable *karma*..." (1981:212-3).

Nevertheless, as Turton mentions, there have many recorded instances of collective protest and open rebellion by peasants, going back several centuries (Chatthip, 1984; Praphat, 1998; Tanabe, 1984). They were relatively disorganised and localised, and usually quickly repressed by the military or police. Many stemmed from peasant resistance to the extension of political and economic control by the Central Thai state, such as the administrative and tax reforms enforced during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). Several incidents have been recorded in the North where peasants revolted against the burdens of new tax regimes in 1889 and 1902 (Chayan, 1984).

Chatthip (1984) describes a number of small, localised peasant revolts in Northeast Thailand from the seventeenth century to 1959 which he calls Holy Men Revolts. Peasants mobilised behind leaders who were believed to be "people with merit" who had acquired great Buddhist power. He argues that these revolts were fundamentally different from peasant revolts in other parts of Thailand, such as the Chiang Mai revolt of 1889 mentioned above, which he suggests were struggles against economic exploitation. But, in fact Chatthip himself shows that many of them involved collective resistance to Central Thai state power and economic exploitation through taxation. Environmental crises such as drought and crop failures throughout the Northeast almost certainly worsened economic pressures and contributed to villagers' grievances and motivations to rebel in some instances (Breazeale, 1975). Tanabe (1984) argues that Buddhist ideas about millenarianism, consciousness of ethnic difference, and experiences of oppression and exploitation also provided ideological motivations for these organised rebellions.

While such peasant rebellions were limited and quickly suppressed, the first opposition movement which carried the organisational and ideological force to gain widespread support among villagers and sustain itself for a relatively long period of time was the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT).

The Communist Rural Insurgency

Writers such as Turton (1987), and Morell and Chai-anan (1981), do not include the CPT insurgency in their accounts of peasant opposition movements, seeming to regard

it as a different sort of phenomenon. Nevertheless, I argue here that the CPT represented an important avenue for organised peasant opposition from the 1960s to the extent that it gained widespread support among disaffected rural villagers in many peripheral areas of Thailand.

The Communist Party of Thailand was founded in 1930 but remained a small urban-based, Chinese-dominated organisation until increasing suppression after Field Marshall Sarit took power in a coup in 1958 spurred the party to change its strategy to rural insurgency among the peasantry (Bowie, 1997; Turton, Fast, & Caldwell, 1978:164). When it turned to rural insurgency in 1961 it only commanded a force of a few hundred active insurgents (see Bowie, 1997). The Party was lead by urban, educated, mainly Sino-Thais, but after it began its organised armed struggle against the state, it steadily attracted growing numbers of peasants into its ranks as active fighters. Evidence suggests that it also gained a much larger number of non-combatant supporters. For analysts like Morell and Chai-anan (1981) the social changes brought about by economic and industrial development, rapid population growth and economic inequality, and exploitation of poor farmers and landless peasants, provided the grievances and motivations for rural villagers to join the insurgency. They also show that state repression, and military and police actions to suppress insurgency and maintain domination, helped drive disaffected villagers into the arms of the communists (see also Bowie, 1997:67-68). Pasuk and Baker (1995:293) give examples of conflicts with state officials over land rights in peripheral communities of the North and Northeast which drove villagers into the insurgency.

The CPT's relatively greater success in recruiting support in Northeast Thailand seems to have been based in the widespread poverty and disaffection with the national government in the region. During the 1960s the CPT concentrated its efforts in the Phuphan mountains traversing the Northeastern provinces of Nakhon Phanom, Kalasin and Sakhon Nakhon and built a strong base of support there (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981:83; Prizzia, 1985:12). From 1965 the insurgency spread to other regions as small-scale conflicts broke out. The CPT developed a recruitment strategy that encouraged their cadres to "assist villagers in building their houses, harvesting their crops, and plowing the land" and to start from local contradictions and grievances in building a revolutionary peasantry (Prizzia, 1985:18-19).

Evaluations of the CPT's influence in rural areas, and estimates of numbers, vary widely across different sources in the literature. Morell and Chai-anan (1981:83) note that in 1969 "the government formally declared selected districts in thirty-five provinces to be 'communist-infested sensitive areas'". Prizzia (1985:20) writes that during the democratic period from 1973 to 1976 the CPT grew in numbers and insurgency stepped up dramatically: "Communist insurgents under arms increased from an estimated 3,500 in 1973 to 5,000 in 1974 and to 8,000 in 1975. The CPT was particularly successful in increasing its strength in northern and northeastern Thailand". Pasuk and Baker (1995:294) report that, "In 1975, the military reckoned that 412 villages were totally under insurgent control, and another 6,000 housing almost 4 million people were subject to some degree of insurgent influence". After the violent coup of October 1976, about 4,000 people fled into the forests to join the CPT in their opposition, including left-wing MPs, labour and student leaders. By 1979 there were an estimated 13,000 insurgents bearing arms (Prizzia 1985).

From 1978 respective Thai governments moved away from a policy of military suppression of the CPT and towards winning the hearts and minds of rural people, and reincorporating alienated students and activists back into the nation-state. On the one hand this involved a series of moratoriums for forest-based insurgents to encourage them to return without fear of arrest or reprisal to their homes and their lives. On the other hand, the state began a concerted effort at rural development, especially in marginal areas of the Northeast, to incorporate marginal communities into mainstream society, both through programs of ideological dissemination and provision of infrastructure such as roads, schools and health stations to alleviate material problems of villagers (Demaine, 1986). Ideological divisions between pro-China and pro-Vietnam factions, loss of outside support, and amnesty offers from Kriangsak's and Prem's government all contributed to a decline and eventual collapse of the CPT's insurgency (Gawin, 1990; Prizzia, 1985). By early 1980s most insurgents had returned from the forests to rejoin the mainstream of Thai society.

The Peasants' Federation of Thailand

The formation of the Peasants' Federation of Thailand (*sahaphan chao-na chao-rai haeng prathet thai*, hereafter referred to as the PFT) in 1974 is held by many

commentators to be a turning point for rural activism and peasant politics (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981; Turton, 1987). Indeed, prior to the formation of the Assembly of the Poor in 1995, the PFT had been the most broad-based, well-organised association of poor, rural villagers in Thailand (Kanoksak, 1997). The Peasants' Federation of Thailand emerged during the democratic period that opened up in the 1973 to 1976 period. This context of liberal parliamentary democracy, greater freedom of association and political confidence of students and political activists is therefore very important in understanding how and why the PFT emerged and grew in prominence when it did. Rising levels of tenancy and landlessness, indebtedness, and exploitation of farmers by landlords, middle men and money-lenders charging high rents and high interest rates led to widespread and growing dissatisfaction and grievances of small farmers by the early 1970s, and in that context the PFT emerged (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981).

The PFT was formed in November 1974 after a series of organised protests and meetings in the North, Centre and Northeast. The protests culminated in a 17-day demonstration by over 10,000 farmers in Bangkok in November 1974 which resulted in the formal declaration of the PFT. According to Turton (1987) student activists played important roles in helping farmers get organised and form the Federation, and had a strong influence on its leadership and political strategies. Farmers also built alliances with workers and supported their campaigns. For instance, Turton (1978:129) reports that in 1974 "some 20,000 farmers... marched on Bangkok in sympathy with the strike of textile workers".

The PFT quickly expanded in terms of geographical reach and membership. Its main social base of support lay in the northern provinces of Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Lampang, but it established offices and organised in 41 of Thailand's 71 provinces (Turton, 1987:38). The PFT sets its goals as investigating farmers' problems and protecting their interests and legal rights. In 1974 the Federation petitioned and mobilised protests calling for land reform and legal controls on land rents. In response to the protests the government passed new laws controlling land rents and promising land reform. The PFT then launched a concerted campaign to inform farmers about their rights under these new laws and to push for their implementation by local level state officials.

The PFT set out to follow peaceful, legal methods of campaigning, petitioning and protest. As Turton (1978:124) points out,

the PFT organized largely in the centrally located valleys and basins of North and Central Thailand where there had not been a history of armed opposition to the government and where armed revolt would have been extremely dangerous and could have been met with overwhelming military suppression.

After a new conservative government was formed in 1975, the PFT began to face systematic opposition from the state, and severe and violent repression by right wing forces and police acting outside the law (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981; Turton, 1987:39). PFT members and supporters were harassed, threatened with arrest and accused of being communists, despite the fact that, unlike the CPT insurgency, it aimed to undertake only peaceful campaigns within the law. At least twenty-one of its leaders were assassinated, both before and after the conservative repression and military coup of 6 October 1976. After the coup, as many of its leaders were jailed, others fled into the forests to join the insurgency. Although some PFT leaders and organisers tried to continue their activities after the October 1976 coup, in the context of renewed authoritarian rule and continued violent repression PFT actions and influence declined and ceased by 1979 (Kanoksak, 1997).

In the sections that follow I will show that the resurgence of political organisation and activism of villagers is directly related to the development and support of the NGO movement in Thailand. The student movement of the 1970s was an important antecedent to the proliferation of NGO activities from the early 1980s.

Middle Class Activism: From the Student Movement to NGOs

Economic growth and industrialisation produced a rapidly expanding and diversifying middle class. By the late 1960s university and tertiary education was expanding rapidly and a growing number of these new tertiary students came from rural village backgrounds. "In the 1960s, universities were set up in each regional centre. The number of university students increased from 18,000 in 1961 to 100,000 in 1972" (Girling, 1981:177). Ramkhamhaeng, an open university, opened in 1971.

From the late 1960s university students began to represent a social force for political change and democratisation (Prizzia & Narong, 1974; Wedel & Wedel, 1987). In 1968,

after the promulgation of a new constitution, “students from fifteen universities and colleges set up the Student Volunteer Group to Observe the National Election” (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981:141). The National Student Centre of Thailand (NSCT), initially established in 1965, became an influential organising centre for student political power and activism after 1969. Morell and Chai-anan (1981:144-5) argue that “With their youthful idealism, optimism, unity, and increasingly efficient organisation, the students had become the most powerful extrabureaucratic force in the country by 1971”. Some of their earliest campaigns were based on strong nationalist ideology, such as student criticism of US imperialism and campaigns against Japanese imports, but as students gained confidence in their political potential they attacked military dictatorship and advocated democratic reform.

In October 1973, police arrested thirteen student and academic activists for handing out leaflets in Bangkok calling for a new constitution, branded them communists and charged them with treason. Students and other supporters began rallying near Thammasat University. By 13 October, when they marched to the Democracy Monument, they numbered about 400,000 people. The student-led mass protests toppled the military dictatorship on 14 October 1973 and brought a short-lived democratic period until 1976, during which progressive and left-wing elements flourished (Bowie, 1997; Girling, 1981; Prizzia & Narong, 1974).

Most students did not hold radical left-wing ideas and, according to Girling (1981), after the success of the mass rallies in October 1973 most withdrew from political activism and returned to their studies. An important radical minority, however, were stimulated by the student movement’s success and the greater freedom and opportunities for organised activism during the mid-1970s. Students participated in the Democracy Dissemination Campaign in 1974, travelling to rural areas to spread ideas about representative democracy and encourage rural villagers to vote (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981; Quinn, 1997). During the 1973-1976 period “student activists were in the vanguard of those seeking to help the workers unite and, above all, to politicise the peasants, making them aware of their rights, the possibilities of action, and the political power of organization” (Girling 1981:199). Students advocated building a progressive democratic movement in alliance with villagers and workers (which they referred to as *sam prasan*, meaning coordinating the three sectors). Consequently, some chose to work

in rural areas and with the Peasants' Federation, while others stayed in the city to work with labour organisations and gained experience of advocacy and campaign work that way (Various interviews with NGO activists, 1997). Furthermore, radical and Marxist literature was published and became widely available. According to Girling (1981:200), "In 1974 Marxist activists gained control of the NSCT, and by 1975 every student union in Bangkok was under radical control".

When right-wing and military forces violently suppressed the student movement on 6 October 1976, many students and political activists were arrested and sentenced to several years jail. Others joined the CPT insurgency in the forest. The precise numbers are not known but commentators estimate that some three to four thousand students and political activists who had been active during the open democratic period, fled into the forests of regional Thailand to join the CPT-led insurgency (Wedel & Wedel, 1987).

The student movement and various student organisations provided a very important recruiting ground for NGOs from the late 1960s. Programs like the Thammasat Graduate Volunteer Program and student clubs which organised 'development camps' to selected poor villages were replicated in most universities throughout Thailand during the 1980s. They put into practice the philosophy of having young middle class students experience the way of life of rural villagers and do local practical development work. Many of the influential figures and activists in the NGO movement during the 1980s and 1990s participated in the student movement activities in the 1970s and politically 'came of age' at that time. Even for a younger generation, the events of 1973 and 1976 in which students played a central role provide a historical reference point and landmark for social activists. The mass demonstrations lead by students in October 1973, and the pro-democracy activism by students during the 1973-76 period fuelled rising confidence and expectations in the movements' capacity for progressive social change and political reform. From that time on tertiary student organisations would provide the main recruiting ground for NGOs.

The NGO Movement and Alternative Development

The category "non-government organisation" is difficult to define. Indeed, in Thailand its meaning has changed during the last three decades as NGOs emerged and exerted a growing impact in society. There has been an ongoing debate within NGO circles,

academic commentators, and in the media about the meaning, role and activities of “NGOs” in Thai society, not least because of their links with foreign and international funding agencies (for example, see Thai Development Support Committee, 1993). In Thai, NGOs are usually referred to as *ongkon phatthana ekkachon* (“private development organisation”) thus explicitly linking NGOs with development work. The English term “NGO” (*en ji oo*) is also frequently used in both spoken and written Thai, making its meaning even more ambiguous. The label now encompasses a huge diversity of voluntary and non-profit organisations (Amara & Nitaya, 1994; Callahan, 1995).

Nevertheless, since the early 1980s a cohesive NGO sector, primarily involved in community development and environmental activism, has emerged which challenges state development policies and promotes social justice and democratisation (Pasuk & Baker, 1995; Prudhisan & Maneerat, 1997; Suthy, 1995). With the rejection of the communist ideology of revolutionary struggle by many Thai radicals, the NGO movement has reflected a growing recognition of diverse sources of social transformation and ways of addressing poverty and social inequality. Most contemporary NGO activists in Thailand may not advocate revolutionary political change, but as Suthy Prasartset writes, many seek “social transformation” through a process of struggling for “popular democracy” and to “enlarge the people’s political space” (1995:121-122). They are overt critics of the concentration of political power, economic inequality, and the “maldevelopment” of Thai society (Suthy, 1995:98). International and domestic support for NGOs have helped create a sector of professional social activists who are largely autonomous from the Thai state system, have independent sources of funding, and are linked with international NGO networks that propagate ideologies of grassroots development, civil society, democratisation, human rights and environmentalism.

The development of NGO activities in Thailand over the last three decades parallels a rapid expansion of NGOs throughout the Third World (Julie Fisher, 1993; 1998; Korten, 1990). Foreign and multilateral development agencies have contributed in important ways to the emergence and growth of the Thai NGO sector, enabling the transfer of funding, development discourses and people. For example, many writers ascribe the beginnings of the modern Thai NGO movement to the founding of the Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM) in 1967 (Gohlert, 1991; Prudhisan & Maneerat,

1997; Suthy, 1995). An initiative of the Director of the Bank of Thailand, Puey Ungphakorn, TRRM was established following the model of the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines and maintained close ties with this institute (see Clarke, 1998:138). It followed a philosophy of alleviating poverty by working closely with rural villagers, based on 14 principles that are still influential among the NGO community today:

approach the people, stay with them, learn from them, plan with them, work with them, begin from what they know, create from what they have, teach by making them learn from practices, not to show off but to be a model, not trivial but be systematic, not isolated but integrated, not to please but to help them change, and not to patronize but to empower (Rueng, 1995:56).

This incipient NGO activity was closely related to the growing student movement. When Puey Ungphakorn became rector of Thammasat University a few years later he also established the Thammasat Graduate Volunteer Program which gave graduates opportunities to undertake social work and development work in rural areas for a one year period (Rueng, 1995). Students at Thammasat and other universities were encouraged to participate in development “camps” in poor rural villages.

The military coup of October 1976 ushered in a temporary hiatus in domestic NGO activity as rural development work was regarded by the right as left-wing and subversive. TRRM was persecuted as a “left-wing organisation” until, in the throes of internal factional conflict, it closed down in February 1978 (Rueng, 1995:53). Nevertheless, during the late 1970s international aid organisations such as UNHCR, REDDBANA and Save the Children became active in aid programs with Indochinese refugees who flooded into Thailand after 1976 (Suthy, 1995). Many of these organisations subsequently expanded their work to community development projects targeting rural poverty in the Northeast and other economically marginal areas. Examples are the NET Project (Northeast Thailand Project) and Grassroots Rural Integrated Development (GRID) Project both in Northeast Thailand (Amporn & Kosol, 1989; Durno, 1989). These development projects provided training and experience for many up and coming Thai development workers and NGO activists.

Closely related to the expanding activities of international aid agencies in Thailand, was the growing influence of development discourses that promoted popular participation

and saw NGOs as more effective and efficient at achieving such participatory development than government agencies. From the early 1970s discourses of rural development which hinge upon strategies of 'bottom-up planning', 'grass-roots' development or community participation grew in influence among the international development community (Hall, 1988; Thomas, 1992). Advocates argued that the participation of the rural poor must be facilitated through local organisations providing democratic opportunities for rural people to collectively plan and implement development activities, and distribute the benefits. They also argued that small-scale NGOs, which could operate locally and independently, are more efficient and effective at initiating and supporting participatory development than centralised, state bureaucracies.

As theories of participation and the comparative advantage of NGOs in implementing grassroots development gained influence, funding agencies such as foreign governments and multilateral organisations began donating large amounts of money to NGOs in Thailand and elsewhere in the Third World. From the early 1980s the NGO sector expanded rapidly as international funding boomed. For instance, in 1985 the Canadian government granted 186 million baht to support over 60 NGO rural development projects. Indeed, Rueng estimates that foreign donors contributed over 300 million baht annually to Thai development NGOs in the early 1990s (1995:66). This international funding boom fostered a rapid expansion of NGO activity in the 1980s, especially local, small-scale projects in rural areas.

Changing political opportunities and the collapse of the communist insurgency also contributed to the growing NGO movement. After 1978 a period of gradual political liberalisation commenced which continued through the 1980s. Thai governments first incorporated the rhetoric of participation into the Fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986) (Demaine, 1986) and tentatively acknowledged the role of NGOs in the Sixth Plan (1987-1992) (Gohlert, 1991:23). Furthermore, after the CPT-led insurgency came to an end in the early 1980s the NGO sector provided a channel for middle class activism and struggle for social reform and democratisation. As Prudhisan and Maneerat (1997) note, some of the activists who had joined the communists "retained their commitment to social change and pursued this through peaceful means, working in [NGOs] and in rural development" (1997:199). NGO work enabled them to

continue the strategy of building relationships and alliances with the rural and urban poor who made up the majority of the population and were seen as the social base of any potential social change. Moreover, “rural development,” “community development” and “alternative development” could accommodate a broader range of ideological perspectives on social change. Many of these NGOs increasingly pursue what Sheth (1987) has called “alternative development as political practice”.

NGO Strategies and Alternative Development

NGOs initially aimed to address local problems of poverty and livelihood through small-scale, local activities that required villagers working together cooperatively in groups. A common philosophy of NGO workers during the 1980s was that “The answer is in the villages” (Anek, 1997:12). Their strategies of community development focused on promoting and supporting villagers’ involvement in rice banks, small cooperatives, revolving funds, handicraft groups and the like. NGOs promoted a philosophy of self-reliance and people’s participation in village-level self-help groups to enable them to work collectively and cooperatively to tackle problems of poverty and income. Alternative livelihood strategies through small-scale integrated farming also came to be widely promoted and supported by NGOs and development projects. They worked closely with villagers in the local communities, and argued that villagers possess local knowledge and skills that should be recognised and utilised. This approach to community development was expressed in the community culture approach which became widely influential throughout the NGO community during the 1980s (Chatthip, 1991).

Out of the theory and practice of alternative development during the 1980s a focus on promoting and supporting villagers’ organisations (*ongkon chao-ban*) emerged as a central strategy of NGO development work that has had growing political implications and a critical role in the development of the villagers’ movements of the 1990s. Many NGO workers believe that “Community organizations really are the most important means for rural society and all of society to sustain itself” (NGO-CORD Isan, 1997:68). They see one of their main roles as supporting villagers’ own local organisations by providing advice, information and resources. As Fisher (1993a; 1998) documents, this has been a widespread phenomena throughout the Third World.

Although there was an explosion of NGOs at the local, rural level, NGOs also were established at regional and national levels, with different relationships to rural development and target communities. NGO workers saw a need for the organised coordination and distribution of news and information to NGOs throughout the country, and hence founded the Thai Development Support Committee (TDSC) in Bangkok in 1982. TDSC publishes and disseminates information in both Thai and English languages. The developing networks became better coordinated and more formalised in mid-1985 with the establishment of a national coordinating body, the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD) (Suthy, 1995). NGO-CORD operates from a national office in Bangkok and operates coordinating centres in each of the regions.

Another example of an NGO playing a key role in NGO networks is the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS). TVS owes its origins to the activities of TRRM and the student movement of the 1970s (Interview, Det Phumkhacha, Bangkok, 27-10-1997). The organisation was established in 1980 with funding from the Ford Foundation. It aimed to be a “recruiting and training agency for Thai development workers” (Gohlert, 1991:126) and recruited young graduates and paid them a small wage to work for two years in one of its member NGOs. By 1987 TVS had a membership network of 36 NGOs where it was placing its young graduate “volunteers” (Gohlert, 1991:126). During the mid-1990s TVS placed an average of twenty volunteers each year into internships with NGOs throughout the country. Most of these member NGOs worked on “issues of community rights and natural resource management which continue to be [the] one most critical social issue in Thai society” (Thai Volunteer Service, 1996:5). The current Director of TVS, Det Phumkhacha, has worked as a social activist since the early 1970s. Over the years he has built up an extensive network of colleagues in NGOs, academia, the media and government departments who support the broad social goals of the NGO sector and advocate political and democratic reform. In 1992 he and Kothom Ariya founded the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD), a coordinating network of democratic activists, to campaign against the prime ministership of General Suchinda Kraprayoon. In 1993 Det became the CPD’s general secretary (Interview, Det Phumkhacha, Bangkok, 27-10-1997).

The growing networks of cooperation between NGOs also enabled them to encourage

linkages between the local groups that they worked with. By the late 1980s NGOs, especially those within the regional NGO-CORD networks, increasingly worked towards building networks of villagers' organisations that extended beyond the local community. As the TVS director stated:

Grassroots groups in different villages are encouraged to exchange and share their problems, solutions, skills and lessons learned so as to strengthen their demands and get mutual benefit from their activities.... Most of the NGO workers who work in rural areas focus their work on strengthening community organization networks. They see the networking of people's organizations as the groundwork for grassroots democratization (Thai Development Support Committee, 1995:39).

In the Northeast, for example, NGO-CORD set up the Isan Farmers' Collective Organisation Support Committee in the early 1990s to promote and support networking between villagers' groups throughout the region. The networks they created included: Alternative Agriculture Group, Domestic Animals Group, Craftwork and Women's Development Network, Isan Land and Forest Committee, Salt Soils Problem Group, River Issues Group (Water Pollution and Dams), Isan AIDS Group (established 1993) and the Slum Communities' Network (NGO-CORD Isan, 1997; Thai Development Support Committee, 1997).

These networks were often based on environmental problems or livelihood issues that were shared across communities. Indeed, as accelerating economic growth and industrialisation resulted in rising demands for natural resources, and as rural villagers became increasingly drawn into conflicts over their local resources, more NGOs became involved in resource issues and as advocates for rural people in environmental disputes (Anek, 1997; Prudhisan & Maneerat, 1997). Resource conflicts and environmental degradation came to be seen as directly linked with state development policies and political processes. NGOs increasingly worked at educating local community members about the wider context of their problems, and encouraged them to join in broader networks for their campaigns. Furthermore, activists saw that environmentalism, as an ideology, could join different classes and groups with divergent material interests together in opposition and protest campaigns (Pinkaw & Rajesh, 1992:5-6).

The Project for Ecological Recovery (PER) is one NGO which has played a key role in the environmental movement in Thailand. A young environmental activist who had participated in the 1970s student movement, Witoon Permpongsachareon, was

instrumental in establishing PER in 1986 with funding from foreign donors (Baker, 1995). PER activists articulate a keen sense of the political causes of environmental destruction. According to Witoon:

Our experiences in Thailand show that the environmental problems can only be solved together with economic and political problems. Conservation depends on strengthening the political influence of local people... we have to study the kind of politics suited to ordinary people... NGOs have to help building networks of local people at village, district, national and international levels. This may not just be around environmental issues. Such movements must be dynamic and avoid becoming institutionalized. Democracy must be both, the aim and the means (quoted in Pfirmann & Kron, 1992:62).

Therefore, PER activists see their aim in terms of building

a social movement that has bargaining power against the forces of destruction at the local, national and international levels, and is able to mobilise the participation and support of diverse communities and groups who have diverging interests (Pinkaw & Rajesh, 1992:4).

In the mid-1980s, PER took on a coordinating role in the campaign against the proposed Nam Choan Dam on the Khwae Yai River in Kanchanaburi Province. The successful campaign became a watershed in Thai environmental politics, encouraging resistance to dam projects elsewhere, and marking the growing legitimacy of environmental discourse in public opposition to state development projects (Hirsch, 1993; Hirsch & Lohmann, 1989). Like the Thai Volunteer Service, PER has also adopted a strategy of placing “volunteers” in the field with local NGOs.

Resurgence of Grassroots Politics: Direct Action and Nonviolent Protest

By the late 1980s, as state agencies and business interests increasingly sought to exploit natural resources in regional Thailand, rural protest re-emerged for the first time since the suppression of 1976 (Pasuk & Baker, 1995:352). At first, collective protests were small in scale and focused on local grievances. In many areas villagers mounted demonstrations at local government and forestry company offices, destroyed seedlings in eucalyptus plantations or opposed eviction from land claimed as forest reserve by the state (Hirsch, 1993; Sanitsuda, 1990). Through their organising and networking efforts with rural villagers, however, NGOs increasingly channelled local grievances into broader-based demonstrations that could target national-level policies. By the end of the 1980s many NGO activists had developed a three-tiered approach to their work: they

continued their grassroots work with villagers' organisations and networks; they sought to build alliances with academics, the media and other sections of middle class; and they campaigned for state policy reforms at a national level (Anek, 1997; Prudhisan & Maneerat, 1997; Suthy, 1995). Mobilised through villagers' organisations and networks, supported by NGOs and allies in the media, rural demonstrations became a powerful political strategy for campaigns targeting both concrete local grievances and the national policies which engendered them.

In 1991 the government and army launched the "Project to Resettle Poor Villages in Degraded Forests" (abbreviated in Thai to *Kho Jo Ko*). The subsequent campaign against the *Kho Jo Ko* program provided a real turning point for rural mobilisation and protest, especially among villagers and NGO activists in the Northeast. The government justified the resettlement program in terms of the need to increase national forest coverage and aimed to reforest degraded and encroached reserve forest land. The project aimed to resettle forest dwellers into designated areas, with supporting community and infrastructure development, create community forest reserves, and replant degraded areas with a focus on commercial plantations of eucalypt and bamboo. If implemented fully, the program would affect 5.8 million villagers living on forest reserve land nationwide (Hirsch, 1993; Murray, 1992a). The project was a collaboration between the army and the Forestry Department, with overall coordination by the army, and projected to cost 12,000 million baht (US\$480 million). The first target of the *Kho Jo Ko* program was the Northeast, which contains the largest areas of degraded forest.

During implementation of the *Kho Jo Ko* program, the army often forcibly removed villagers from their land, destroying houses and village temples in the process to ensure that they would not return. Evicted villagers were relocated onto poor, infertile land with little infrastructure and had to start from scratch (*Bangkok Post* 17 December 1991:1, Mangkorn & Anutra, 1992). In other cases, villagers were relocated to nearby degraded forest land that was already settled, resulting in conflicts between relocated and established villagers. Evicted villagers often had no choice but to squat on other, unsettled forest land.

Rural people responded in a range of ways. In many cases when faced with government officials, often backed up by the army, they had no choice but to comply with eviction

orders. Northeastern NGOs campaigned among affected communities in an effort to expand existing networks and develop a mass base for opposition. NGO-CORD formed the "Northeast Forest and Land Network" to coordinate and stimulate local actions. Villagers from 47 forest reserves in 17 Northeast provinces joined the network to oppose *Kho Jo Ko* and campaign for land rights (NGO-CORD Isan, 1997:73). The network found strong centres of support among villages which had previously come under CPT influence (Fieldnotes, Pak Chong, Nakhon Ratchasima, 3-7-1997). Another newly-formed network, the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast, helped bring representatives from widely spread affected communities together and mobilise villagers for protest campaigns (see next section for an account of this organisation). Northeastern NGOs, through NGO-CORD, mounted a media and educational campaign on the impact of *Kho Jo Ko* and organised popular forums for NGOs and villagers to voice their grievances and keep the issue a lively topic in the print media (Niran, 1994).

The campaign culminated in mass demonstrations and a protest march by villagers in June and July 1992. NGO activists and villagers' leaders took advantage of political and ideological opportunities that opened up following the Black May protests and violence in Bangkok the previous month. In the wake of the resignation of Suchinda Kraprayoon, the decline of military influence in politics and a huge upsurge in public rejection of military force and violence to suppress dissent, activists "launched large scale demonstrations against the *Kho Jo Ko* lasting all through June" (Tjelland, 1995:202). Late in the month over ten thousand villagers rallied at the Provincial Hall in Nakhon Ratchasima and began marching down the Mitraphap Highway towards Bangkok, "demanding that the Prime Minister come to meet them and stop the *Kho Jo Ko*, grant them the right to return to their land and legal land-right papers" (Tjelland, 1995:203). They rallied at Pak Chong, a geographic and symbolic 'doorway' to Isan, and closed the highway for several days until the Prime Minister sent a delegate, the Deputy Interior Minister, to meet and negotiate with the protesters. As a result the government agreed to cancel the program.

According to many NGO activists, the success of the protest march boosted the confidence of villagers in public demonstrations as a political strategy, and protest actions by several different villagers' groups increased dramatically in the years that followed. After the successful campaign the Isan Forest and Land Network changed its

name to the Isan Farmers' Assembly for Protection of Land Rights³ (*Samatcha chao-na chao-rai phak isan*). To mark the importance of the Pak Chong rally, the Isan Farmers' Assembly erected a shrine (*san phi*) overlooking the site and rally there every year in July to commemorate the original demonstration (Fieldnotes, 2-3 July 1997, Pak Chong). The network continues to campaign on behalf of members, seeking land reform and secure land tenure, as well as financial compensation for the impacts of the *Kho Jo Ko* program.

Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast (ASFN)

Another leading example of the resurgence of political organisation and protest by rural villagers at this time was the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast (*Samatcha kasettakon rai yoi*, referred to here as the ASFN). While the Isan Farmers' Assembly mobilised villagers around land rights issues stemming from the *Kho Jo Ko* program, the ASFN aimed to create a network for campaigns focusing on practical livelihood issues for small-scale farmers. In fact the two networks overlapped to a certain extent. The ASFN became famous throughout Thailand for its protest rallies and demonstrations during the early 1990s. By 1994, however, many NGO workers and activists were raising concerns about the effectiveness of such strategies. This was coupled with growing frustration that governments often responded to protest actions with empty promises to appease demonstrator's demands but rarely followed up with tangible action or real policy change (Sanitsuda, 1995).

The ASFN emerged out of an NGO and villagers' campaign against a government proposal to create a National Agricultural Council (NAC), which they believed would "serve the benefits of the capitalist farmers and agribusiness groups instead of small farmers" (Jarin, 1995:34). Drawing on their networks of villagers' organisations and NGOs, NGO-CORD Isan organised a conference to discuss the NAC proposal in March 1992. At this conference the formation of the ASFN was officially announced and a Secretarial Office to oversee its operations was established (Jarin, 1995; Sanan, 1997).

The ASFN's constitution states that their goal is to "protect the rights and interests of

³ This is its official title in English, from the *Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations* (Thai

northeastern Thai peasants with their dignity seen as equal to other groups of people in Thai society” (Jarin 1995:34). With its broad social base among small-scale farmers in Isan villages, the ASFN aimed to improve its members’ position within the agricultural economy by petitioning the state on agricultural policy and demanding economic support for small farmers, for example on issues of agricultural debts. The ASFN anchored its campaigns firmly in the material grievances of its members, and this helps explain the rapid expansion of its membership from 1992 to 1995, and its ability to mobilise large numbers of villagers for demonstrations. Moreover it consistently linked specific grievances to attacks on government policy and advocacy for policy reform.

Jarin (1995) reports that the organisation rapidly grew from about 3,000 members when it was first established to about 30,000 members by 1995. But, as Jarin points out, the membership is relatively fluid and variable: villagers participate according to their local situation and needs, some joining only when their community encounters a particular problem. Unlike the NGOs which support it, the ASFN raises most of its funding from its members. Members pay an annual fee of 100 baht and receive a membership card. When the ASFN stages rallies or demonstrations members make small contributions of money and provisions to support the campaign.

ASFN members joined the huge demonstration march against the *Kho Jo Ko* program in 1992 (NGO-CORD Isan, 1997:70; Somphan, Wichian, Mana, & Akanit, 1997:67). After this successful mass action the ASFN quickly became well known for its protest rallies and marches. The “Long March” down the Mitraphap Highway towards Bangkok became the main ASFN strategy of political agitation to gain media coverage and force the government into meetings and negotiations over their petitions (Jarin, 1995:45). During the following three years ASFN staged four major protest rallies and several smaller demonstrations demanding that the government respond to their petitions. In some cases, up to 15,000 villagers participated. Bamrung Kayotha, a founding member and leader of the ASFN until October 1995, emerged as a high-profile and influential leader.

Development Support Committee, 1997) and not a direct translation from the Thai.

By the end of 1995 internal conflict and factionalism split the ASFN into at least three separate factions or organisations (Praphat, 1998:58). Several factors contributed to the organisational rupture. First, a conflict arose among ASFN leaders over the breadth of their campaign goals. One faction advocated continuing their struggles for the political rights of member groups. An emerging faction called for a return to a focus on small farmers' economic issues. The newly elected secretary-general who replaced Bamrung favoured economic issues. Second, organisers and leaders within the ASFN had faced harassment, threats and violence from influential figures and the police. Earlier in 1995 an ASFN organiser, who was leading a campaign against rock quarry pollution in Loei Province, was shot and killed (*Bangkok Post*, Reuters Database, 30 July 1995). Bamrung stepped down before elections in 1995 quoting concerns for his own safety. Third, the New Aspiration political party, with its major social support base in Isan, set out to coopt ASFN leaders and use the network to canvass votes. The ASFN continues to exist but has split up into several different organisations, two of which still use the name (Praphat, 1998:58).

The “Assembly of the Poor” Conference

After factionalism split the ASFN in 1995, the stage was set for the formation of the first national organisation of poor villagers since the Peasants' Federation of Thailand twenty years previously. NGO activists from the ASFN, and villagers' leaders such as Bamrung, saw the need for a broad umbrella organisation concerned with fighting for community rights and not just narrow economic interests (Interview, Bamrung Kayotha, Khon Kaen, 9-9-1997). They came up with the idea of a conference to coincide with the ASEAN Summit scheduled for Bangkok on 14-15 December 1995. The Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD) and Friends of the People (*Klum pheuan phrachachon*, who support villagers' groups facing dams and large-scale projects) were the main Bangkok-based NGOs who coordinated the conference. ACFOD, with established links with foreign NGOs, organised international representatives from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Cambodia, Nepal and Australia and provided a translator. Other Thai NGOs represented included the Thai Volunteer Service, Project for Ecological Recovery, Student Federation of Thailand, Thai Development Support Committee and the Wildlife Fund Thailand (Bantorn Ondam, 1997). All of these NGOs have continued to play important support roles in the Assembly of the Poor.

On 10 December 1995 two hundred and fifty villagers' and NGO delegates gathered at Thammasat University in Bangkok to launch the conference, entitled "Assembly of the Poor: The consequences of large-scale development projects" (*Samatcha khon jon: an neuang ma jak phonkratop khong khrongkan phatthana khanat yai*). The villagers' organisations represented included break away groups from the ASFN, the Northern Farmers' Network, the Network of People Affected by Dams, the Isan Farmers' Assembly for Protection of Land Rights, and a network of urban slum dwellers.

The conference was highly mobile, moving from the 'centre' (Bangkok) to the 'periphery' and finally back to the 'centre'. Following the opening session at Thammasat University, the delegates travelled to Khong Jiam, a small district centre located at the confluence of the Mun and Mekong Rivers in the Northeast (see Map 1). Here in this peripheral community, local villagers' organisations campaigning over the impacts of two large dams (Pak Mun and Sirinthorn) acted as the symbolic hosts for the conference. Villagers, academics, students and NGO activists presented speeches and participated in a panel discussion on "Democracy, Human Rights and the Poor Today". Villagers' delegates spoke about their struggles to defend their communities against the depredations of industrial development, state incursions on land and forests, and large-scale projects such as dams. Participants "agreed to form a loosely structured network called the '[Assembly] of the Poor' focussing on their problems and seeking solutions" (Bantorn, 1997). NGO activists prepared the "Mun River Declaration", a manifesto announcing the formation of the Assembly and presenting an ideological critique of industrial development. The Mun River Declaration proclaims that the Assembly of the Poor is a "platform (*wethi*) for mutual learning and exchange of knowledge about our problems by poor and disadvantaged people in society". The Assembly aims to "to build the power and cooperation of the poor at the local, national and international levels to convince the public that states must manage resources in ways that ensure equity and fairness for all people, free rights, and popular participation and self-determination". The Declaration goes on to attack state policies that promote industrial development at the expense of the environment, the small-scale agricultural sector and urban labourers. Finally, the Declaration calls on all states to adopt development models that protect human rights and community rights to participate in decision-making about development that affects them.

On the final day of the conference in Khong Jiam, participants resolved to return to Bangkok to present the Mun River Declaration as a gesture of protest to ASEAN. After travelling by train to Bangkok, on 15 December six hundred people marched from Hualumphong Railway Station to the site of the ASEAN Summit, where they were stopped by police from presenting the Mun River Declaration to ASEAN delegates (Bantorn, 1997). Along with the Mun River Declaration, the Assembly submitted a petition to the government with a detailed list of grievances of member groups, declaring a 30 day deadline for a response (Assembly of the Poor, 1996). The Assembly of the Poor was born, announcing its intentions with its first manifesto, and grabbing media and public attention with its protest march and petition to the ASEAN Summit and the Thai government.

Conclusion

The Assembly of the Poor locates its own history in the resurgence of political activism and protest by rural villagers during the early 1990s. The Assembly's version of its origins begins with the formation of the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast in 1991 and then chronicles a series of mass mobilisations by villagers' organisations, such as the protests against the *Kho Jo Ko* forest resettlement scheme, demonstrations against the Pak Mun Dam, and subsequent rallies by the ASFN. Thus, this history (written by NGO activists within the movement) emphasises the collective agency of rural villagers and their growing political assertiveness during the 1990s. It is a "History of the People's Struggle" and "Poor People's Fighters" (Assembly of the Poor, 1997e). NGO activists are there, but in the background. As I discuss further in later chapters, this stems (at least in part) from a struggle to assert the collective agency and political identity of "the Poor", *khon jon*. In this chapter I have also focused on the agency of rural villagers and peasants, but have also sought to account for another group of social actors, political activists and NGO workers, and the changing structural context of villager and NGO activity.

I have argued that in order to understand the origins of the Assembly of the Poor, we need to see it in the context of a much longer history of the consequences of economic development, rural resistance to exploitation and middle class activism. Thus, I briefly described the changing socio-economic context that has been transformed by rapid industrialisation and economic development set in train in the early 1960s. By the 1980s

the environmental impacts of development and conflicts over resources were creating renewed threats to livelihoods and social cohesion in rural communities, many of which were already hard hit by economic inequality and exploitation and the structural decline of agriculture. Having outlined these structural forces, I explored the backgrounds of the two main social actors in the Assembly, rural villagers and middle class NGO activists. I related organised rural opposition to a long history of rural resistance and collective struggle against exploitation and domination, exemplified in the histories of the communist insurgency and the Peasants' Federation of Thailand, which, although expressing very different ideologies, strategies and social goals, were both brutally suppressed. The resurgence of rural organising and political protest in the 1990s was due in large part to the new forms of organisation and networking developed in alliance with the NGO movement. This NGO movement grew out of the student movement and middle class political activism which first emerged in the 1970s and gave many current activists first hand experience of working with rural villagers in the Peasants' Federation of Thailand and the communist insurgency.

In the next chapter I describe in greater detail the Assembly's ideological expressions and campaign goals as part of a broad overview of the movement, including its organisational structure and membership.

3 **From Local Struggles to National Social Movement: An Overview of the Assembly**

The Assembly of the Poor was established to enable villagers' organisations from around the country to come together in a forum to exchange information and resources, and to increase their bargaining power for their own campaigns through a larger umbrella organisation. This chapter gives an overview of the Assembly of the Poor as a general context for the more ethnographic chapters which follow. I describe the social bases of its membership, its organisational structure, campaign goals, ideological expressions and social critique. The great majority of its members organise and campaign around *local* issues stemming from development projects or policy. Indeed, I argue that a key factor in the Assembly's ability to mobilise large numbers of people in campaigns and protests is its faithfulness to the concrete local grievances of each of the groups in its network. But this also presents problems for building a cohesive, broader movement able to campaign at the national level (Esteva & Prakash, 1992; Wolin, 1992). Therefore, these tensions between local issues and national movement, and how the Assembly endeavours to overcome them through construction of a cohesive policy platform and political identity, constitute theoretical issues that run through the chapter.

"Development" is often represented in terms of national interest and national development, especially in many of the large-scale projects contested by the Assembly of the Poor. On the other hand, environmental conflict usually begins with people facing concrete environmental problems in their own locality. A grounding in local issues is, of course, a common feature of environmental movements throughout the Third World. Thus, their grievances give people a local, concrete context from which to express opposition to "abstract national goals" of "development" (Esteva & Prakash, 1992:50). But, as Wolin (1992:252) writes, "the localism that is the strength of grassroots organizations is also their limitation". People in a particular locality have limited power to oppose the state and oppose "disruptive forces that pretend to speak in the name of 'the nation' " (Esteva & Prakash, 1992:50). Hence, they need to find allies and build coalitions. They need to find forms of opposition and protest that allow each local group to maintain their roots in their own territory, while also mounting a unified campaign at

the abstract national level. As Esteva and Prakash (1992:50) write about the Narmada campaign in India, "grassroots groups need to.... [resist] not only the dams, but also the language of ... [national development] used to promote them".

If 'liberation ecology' movements in the Third World represent movements for progressive change and political transformation, then how do they move beyond the problems of localism? In the case of the Assembly of the Poor a number of strategies can be seen. First, the Assembly asserts a political identity as a national movement of the "poor" who are "victims of development". This political identity seeks to recognise and celebrate the geographic and cultural diversity of member groups, while promoting solidarity through recognition of a "common context of struggle"⁴ and shared political goals. Second, building on the concrete grievances that make the foundation of the movement, activists have developed a policy platform calling for democratisation and policy reforms to enhance the rights and avenues for participation of local communities.

These processes of identity construction and representation are thus central to the Assembly's ideological critique of "development" and Thai society, and I return to consider them in greater depth later in this chapter. First, however, I will briefly review the membership, class base and organisational structure of the Assembly, and explain the nature of its petitions and campaigns.

Who are the Assembly of the Poor? Villagers, NGOs and Academics

Three main groups of actors make up the Assembly of the Poor: local villagers and slum-dwellers, development-oriented non-government organisations (NGOs), and academics and student activists. The first group, villagers and slum-dwellers, constitute the grassroots constituency of the movement; they are "the Poor" in the Assembly of the Poor. NGO activists, mainly with urban, middle-class backgrounds, play a key role in providing information and support, maintaining and coordinating the network of groups in the Assembly, and communicating with other organisations. The third group, academics and student activists, have close ties with the NGOs and play similar roles.

⁴ This phrase comes from Third World feminists who seek to develop a feminist consciousness that can accommodate and unite the diverse identities and class positions of women. Hence they speak of consciousness based on a "common context of struggle" rather than essentialising categories (see

Villagers' Organisations and Networks

Groups of villagers from localities throughout Thailand constitute the rank and file membership of the Assembly. In the previous chapter I mentioned a number of villagers' organisations or networks which sent delegates to the conference in December 1995 and subsequently established the Assembly of the Poor. By 1997 the following six villagers' organisations had joined:

- Network of People Affected by Dams (*Khreua-khai kheuan*),
- Isan Farmers' Assembly for Protection of Land Rights (*Samatcha chao-na chao-rai isan*),
- Northern Farmer's Network (*Khreua-khai klum-kasetakon phakneua*),
- Slum Organisation for Democracy (*Ongkon salam pheua prachathipatai*),
- Alternative Agriculture Network (*Khreua-khai kasetthakam thangleuak*),
- Thai National Network for Workplace and Environmental Illness (*Khreua-khai phu-puay jak kanthamngan lae singwaetlom haeng prathet thai*),
- Southern Local Fishers' Confederation (*Samaphan chao-pramong pheun-ban phaktai*) (Assembly of the Poor, 1997d; 1997h).

According to the Assembly, these networks represent some 36,000 families from every region of the country. For the purposes of its campaigns and petitions, the Assembly breaks down its grassroots membership into seven "problem groups" (*klum panha*) according to the kind of grievance that each local group faces. These groups are:

1. Forest and Land Group	91 grievances
2. Dams Group	15 grievances
3. State Development Projects	5 grievances
4. Slum Community Group	8 grievances
5. Work-Related and Environmental Illness	1 grievance
6. Alternative Agriculture	1 grievance
7. Small fishers	1 grievance

(Assembly of the Poor, 1997i)

Forest and Land Group (Klum pa-mai thi-din)

This "problem group" basically includes the membership of the Isan Farmers' Assembly for Protection of Land Rights and the Northern Farmer's Network. Their campaigns stem from conflicts over land rights or control of local forest resources. In

Mohanty, 1991:7).

the previous chapter I explained the origins of the Isan Farmers' Assembly in the conflict over the *Kho Jo Ko* forest resettlement program. It now has members from about 400 villages in 47 forest localities throughout the Northeast. According to Isan Farmers' Assembly leaders, 3,000 to 4,000 members participated in the Assembly of the Poor protest in 1997 (Interview, Phaibun, NGO coordinator, Khon Kaen, 20-8-1997). In 1996 and 1997 this organisation made compensation for resettlement and disruption to livelihoods by the *Kho Jo Ko* program a central campaign goal in the Assembly's petition to the state.

Pratuang (1997) has described the origins of the Northern Farmers' Network, which was formed out of local community networks in Northern Thailand in the early 1990s, with the encouragement and assistance of NGOs and academics. This Network campaigns on resource rights and social justice for member communities, many of whom are from ethnic minority ("hill tribe") groups such as the Karen. Its membership extends to about fifty upland and forest-based villages (Praphat, 1997a; Pratuang, 1997).

These two organisations also represent villagers facing eviction or displacement from land classified by the government as Public Land, National Park Land or Reserve Forest. They campaign for recognition of their land rights based on prior settlement, and demand either land title reform or fair compensation for displacement. In other cases local commons land or land traditionally used as community forest has been destroyed or taken over for commercial forestry or eucalyptus plantations. These groups campaign for revocation of eucalyptus concessions in the local area, rehabilitation of community forests and recognition and protection of local people's rights to manage and control local forest resources. Altogether villagers from 91 localities in the North and Northeast are represented in the Forest and Land Group (Assembly of the Poor, 1997i).

Dams Group (Klum kheuan)

The Dams Group includes local people from proposed dam sites, and villagers affected by dams already completed. Villagers from six localities facing proposed dam construction constitute the first sub-group, the most controversial and high-profile in recent years being the Kaeng Sua Ten dam in the Northern province of Prae (see chapter 7 for more details). According to the Assembly of the Poor (1997i) this sub-group of villagers facing proposed dams includes over 5000 families. All of these

proposed dams are under the administration of the Irrigation Department in the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. The villagers' organisations represented here totally oppose dam construction and aim to have the projects cancelled.

The second sub-group is called the "Group affected by dams already completed" and includes villagers from nine dam sites including the Pak Mun (see Chapter 4), Sirinton and Rasi Salai Dams. All are located in the Northeast, except for Huay Khon Kaen Dam in Petchabun, Central Thailand. All members of this group, consisting of about 7000 families in total, petition for appropriate "compensation and assistance for affected communities" (Assembly of the Poor, 1997).

State Development Projects (Klum khrongkan-rat)

This group consists of about 1,300 families from five communities affected by state construction projects. In some cases, such as the small township of Chong Mek, Ubon Ratchathani Province, where villagers' farms were bulldozed to make way for redevelopment of a border checkpoint between Thailand and Laos, the projects are already complete and affected communities have been campaigning for appropriate compensation. In other cases, such as the Genco Waste Disposal Unit (General Environmental Conservation Company, partially state owned) proposed for Rayong, and the Phor Khiaw Government Offices in Suphanburi, groups of local villagers are waging ongoing campaigns to oppose construction.

Slum Communities (Klum chum-chon ae at)

This is the major group of urban origin in the Assembly of the Poor, consisting of networks of slum dwellers in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Although this group is urban-based, their problems are very similar to rural villagers in the Forest and Land Group described above. They are members of slum communities situated on public or crown land without title deeds or secure tenure on their dwellings. Hence they have little bargaining power when faced with eviction for state projects such as the Hopewell Railway project or Khlong Toey redevelopment. The Hopewell Railway project in Bangkok was expected to displace 1,200 families, who petitioned for appropriate financial assistance to relocate their dwellings. In other cases groups of slum-dwellers seek to delay threats of eviction, and influence decisions about redevelopment. According to Sawang, an NGO advisor to the Slum Organisation for Democracy, this

group encompasses about 1,800 families (Interview, Sawang, 29-10-1997, Bangkok).

Work-Related Illness Group (Klum phu-puay jak kanthamngan)

This group is also urban-based and is the smallest group in the Assembly of the Poor. The Thai National Network for Workplace and Environmental Illness was established to gather information and represent industrial labourers whose working conditions cause chronic sickness. Many of them are subsequently laid off with little or no workers' compensation or assistance with medical costs. In 1997 the compensation claims of 36 workers were represented in the Assembly of the Poor.

Alternative Agriculture Group (Klum kasetthakam thang-leuak)

The Alternative Agriculture Network, which represents about 2000 farming families nationwide (Rawadee, 1996), joined the Assembly of the Poor before its mass protest in 1997. This is the only organisation in the Assembly that does not campaign on specific local grievances. Rather, the Alternative Agriculture Network petitions for broader policy changes, including revision of the latest Agricultural Development Plan and state recognition and support, including financial support, for small-scale alternative agriculture projects (Assembly of the Poor, 1997f).

Small Fishers (Chao-pramong pheun-ban)

The Southern Local Fishers' Confederation, a network of small-scale fishers from thirteen provinces in the South, joined the Assembly during its 1997 protest (Fieldnotes, 20-2-1997, Bangkok). Its active membership was reported at approximately four hundred at the time (Chakrit, 1997c). The Fishers' Confederation petitioned the state to enforce the 3,000 metre coastal exclusion zone to protect their members from the depredations of large, commercial fishing boats (Assembly of the Poor, 1997g).

Origins and Bases of Support

Table 1 shows the approximate numbers of people in each problem group, according to Assembly of the Poor figures, presented in Praphat (1997a:4). The Forest and Land, and Dams Groups constitute the great majority of the Assembly's membership. This reflects the fact that the Dams Network, the Isan Farmers' Assembly and the Northern Farmers

Network are key organisations in the movement.

Problem Group	Number of Grievances	Number of Families (approximately)	Number of People (approximately)
1 Forest & Land	93	21,900	109,500
2 Dams	16	11,100	55,500
3 State Projects	5	1,300	6,500
4 Slum Communities	8	1,800	9,000
5 Work-Related Illness	1	36	-
6 Alternative Agriculture	1	-	-
7 Small Fishers	1	-	-
TOTAL	125	36,100	180,500

Table 1 Approximate membership numbers in the Assembly of the Poor (from Praphat, 1997a:4)

Table 2 shows the distribution of grievances by region. We can see that most of the communities are located in the Northeast with the North contributing the next largest group.

Region	Forest & Land	State Projects	Dams	Slums	Work Illness	Small Fishers	TOTAL
Northeast	59	3	12				74
North	32		1	4			37
South			3			1	4
Central	1	1					2
East	1	1					2
Bangkok				4	1		5
TOTAL	94	5	16	8	1	1	124

Table 2 Distribution of grievances by region (from Praphat 1997a:5). Note: The Alternative Agriculture Network is nationwide and hence not listed here.)

Development NGOs

The second group to play a key role in the Assembly of the Poor is a network of development-oriented NGOs.⁵ They fall mostly into three groups: locally-based NGOs working directly with and supporting villagers' organisations and networks; NGO

⁵ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the role of NGOs in the origins of the Assembly, and Chapter 5 for a detailed account of NGO activists' backgrounds and roles in the Assembly.

workers who staff and run the Assembly of the Poor secretarial office in Bangkok; other NGO staff based in Bangkok and regional centres who act as consultants or perform specialised tasks as required. But it is important to note that these three categories overlap to a degree because of the high mobility of NGO workers themselves. NGO activists provide technical knowledge, support and advice, prepare and produce most of the media releases and public relations material (including leaflets, magazines, and videos), and perform the work of linking the Assembly to other NGOs and organisations.

An example is the Bangkok-based NGO, Friends of the People (*Klum pheuan prachachon*), whose office provides the main coordinating and secretarial centre for the Assembly. This small NGO was established in 1995 at the instigation of NGO activists in the Thai Volunteer Service and NGO-CORD. Its stated objectives are to “promote and support organisations and networks of villagers affected by state development projects” (Thai Development Support Committee, 1997:62). This NGO played a key role in arranging the first Assembly of the Poor conference in December 1995. It has a handful of staff, most of whom have several years experience as social activists, usually since their days as students (Interviews with Wiset and Jaroen, Friends of the People staff, Bangkok, 1-9-1997).

Academics and Student Activists

A number of academics and student activists work closely with the NGO activists and support Assembly activities in a range of ways. Student volunteers help out at Assembly protests and often assist with secretarial duties at Assembly meetings. The Student Federation of Thailand has remained a staunch supporter and makes public announcements and lobbies in support of Assembly campaigns.

Academic supporters, such as a small group of political scientists based at Chulalongkorn University, frequently organise seminars to bring villagers’ delegates and their NGO advisers together with academics, journalists and other political activists such as labour leaders to discuss Assembly campaigns and strategies. A small number of academics occupy reflexive positions in relation to the Assembly. That is, they work within the movement, advising on organisation and strategy, assisting with the preparation of documents and media releases, while also writing *about* the Assembly

and interpreting it to a broader academic and middle class community.

Somkiat Phongpaibun is one example. Born in the Northeast, Somkiat studied education at Srinakharinwirot University and Khon Kaen University. He has been a lecturer at the Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat Institute (Teachers College) since 1975. After the violent suppression and coup of October 1976 he acted as a link between urban-based activists and CPT insurgents in the forests, a dangerous and risky occupation at the time. Later, he became an adviser to the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast, an important precursor to the Assembly of the Poor. He told me that he regards himself as a “leftist radical” (using the English phrase) and took great pride in his political activism. For his efforts he has been subject to a number of disciplinary inquiries by the Ministry of Education. Somkiat has also been a regular columnist in several weekly current affairs magazines published for an urban, educated, middle class audience. In 1994 he wrote a series of 32 articles for *Than Setakit* magazine about the history of the ASFN, and in 1996 published a series about the Assembly of the Poor in *Khrungtep Turakit* magazine (Fieldnotes, 26-7-1997, Hang Dong, Chiang Mai). He believes that poor people must “join forces to undertake direct political action and establish alliances to press the government to do something” to assist them. Somkiat describes the Assembly of the Poor as “a new social movement which is not only there for the benefit of members. It is also concerned about social issues, such as the environment, human rights and political reform, or so-called eco-politics which is a grassroots movement” (Ampa, 1997).

Building a Movement: Organisation and Decision-making

The Assembly describes itself as a “network” (*khreua-khai*) rather than an organisation in its own right. Like a network, power and decision-making are decentralised diffusely throughout, rather than concentrated at the head of a hierarchical structure. Similarly, knowledge, information and resources are diffuse. In a way it has remained faithful to the process of its birth during the “Assembly of the Poor” conference in 1995. That is, the Assembly endeavours to retain the nature of a “forum” in which representatives of villagers’ organisations, NGOs and academics come together to share knowledge and experiences, make decisions collectively and democratically, and devise collective responses and strategies. Financial and human resources, and decision-making power largely remain with the dispersed villagers’ organisations and NGOs, except during

protest rallies. In any case, the relatively poor villagers and cash-strapped NGOs would not be able to fund or support a centralised bureaucratic structure or expensive secretariat. The decentralised, network-like structure of the movement thus suits a movement of poor, marginalised villagers. Nevertheless, as the movement has grown and received donations of money and other resources, especially during protest rallies, the coordinating function and financial resources of the secretarial office have grown in importance.

Figure 1 (following page) shows how the Assembly represented its own organisational “structure” in publicity leaflets published during the 1997 protest (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h). It would be a mistake to interpret this as depicting a highly structured, hierarchical organisation. Rather, through such a diagram the Assembly aims to illustrate how “local communities” (*chumchon pheun-thi*) with specific “problems” (*panha*) constitute the foundation of the movement and are linked together through networks of people with similar grievances. Each specific “problem case” (*koroni panha*) is represented in the Assembly’s detailed petition to the state as a basis for negotiation.

At the top of the structure are the *pho khrua yai* (literally: male “head chefs”) who constitute the collective leadership of the Assembly. Through the *pho khrua yai* the Assembly has sought new ways of collective decision-making and democratic self-management. Each local group in the Assembly chooses one or more delegates to attend the *pho khrua yai* meetings, depending on their size. The number attending varies from meeting to meeting, but in total there are usually about 260 delegates (Fieldnotes, 16-3-1997, Assembly rally at Sanam Luang, Bangkok). Thus, each “local community” is represented through its delegates in the leadership. According to the Assembly, *pho khrua yai* meetings represent the highest form of authority in the movement, determining campaign tactics and strategies, protest actions, press releases and so on. As I will discuss further in Chapters 5 and 7, however, NGO activists (shown as “advisers” separate from the *pho khrua yai* meetings in Figure 1) exercise power and influence in these meetings, and the movement as whole, that far outweighs their small numbers and contradicts such democratic rhetoric.

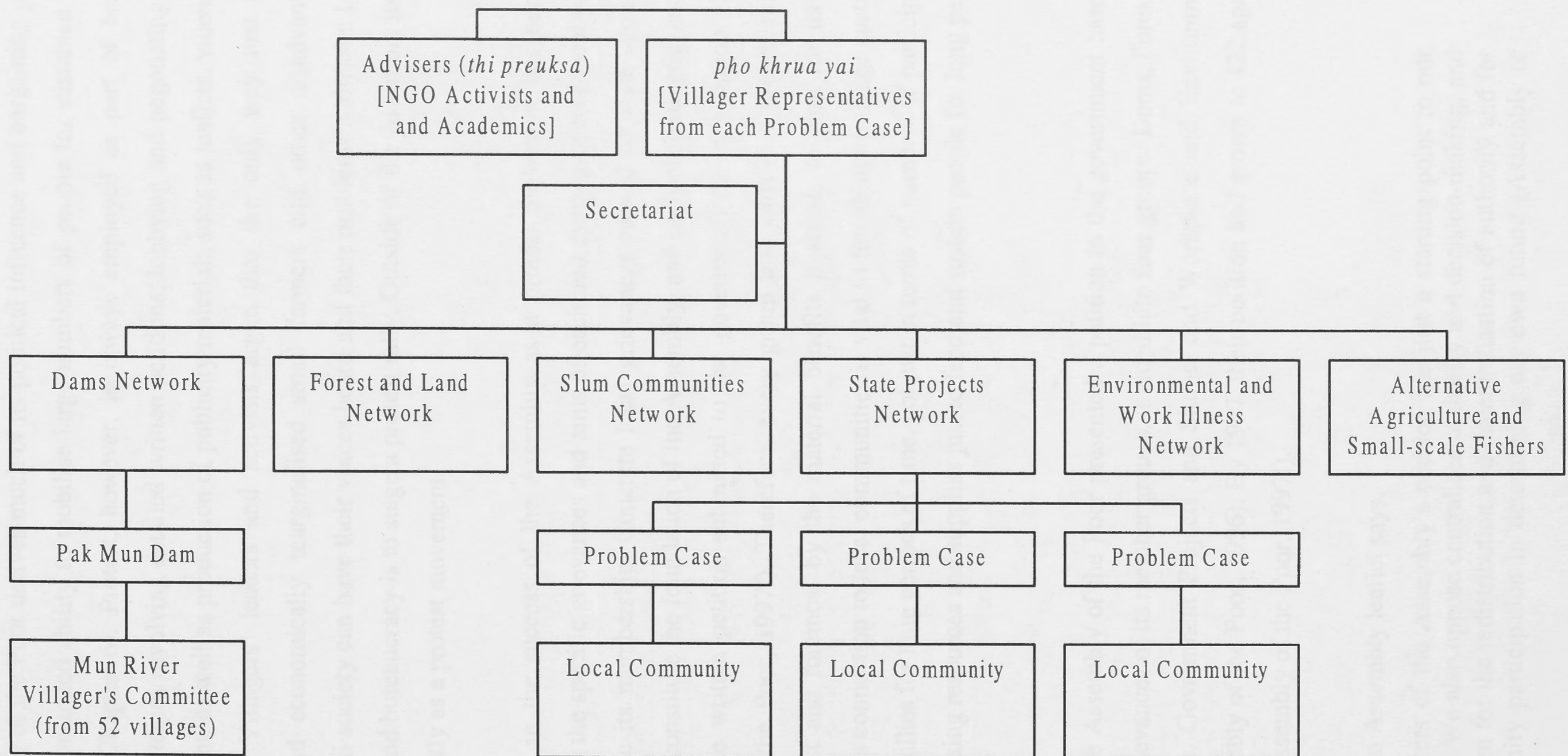


Figure 1: Structure of the Assembly of the Poor, according to Publicity Leaflet No. 1 (1997)

The Power of Public Protest: Campaigns and Activities

The Assembly of the Poor derives much of its political influence and bargaining power from its demonstrated ability to mobilise large numbers of people for sustained mass protest (see Chapter 6). Protest, however, is always employed as part of broader campaign strategies involving detailed written petitions, lobbying and negotiating with the government, as well as production of publicity materials such as leaflets, videos and other media. Villagers' leaders and activists argue that the only way that poor, politically and economically marginalised small farmers and other disadvantaged groups in Thai society can have their voices heard and their problems addressed by the government and bureaucracy is to stage a protest rally. Outside of the Assembly itself it is known mostly as a protest movement.

A key factor in the success of the Assembly as a protest movement has been its faithfulness to the specific grievances and aims of each and every group of local people who constitute its membership. Concrete local grievances caused by state sponsored development constitute the foundation of the Assembly, and each of these grievances is detailed in the written petition submitted to the government for negotiation (1996; Assembly of the Poor, 1997). Therefore, every group that joins in a protest rally is motivated first and foremost by the material benefits it stands to gain for its own members. This connection to local communities is vital to the ability to stage sustained mass protest rallies for long periods of time, not just in terms of numbers of participants, but for mobilising resources and supplies just to feed and sustain people for long periods of time.

In 1995-96 the Assembly of the Poor presented a petition to the government based on 47 specific grievances of its member groups, divided into four groups: Dams, Forest and Land disputes, Government Projects and Slums, and Workplace and Environmental Illness (Assembly of the Poor, 1996). By 1997, their petition had grown to 122 specific grievances (Assembly of the Poor, 1997).

However, as an Assembly leaflet says,

the matters of the Assembly's petition are just a starting point to our rights... We also oppose centralised authority and decision-making, and campaign for the redistribution and decentralisation of authority and for community participation in determining our own future (Assembly of

the Poor, 1997h).

NGO activists have developed an overarching policy platform advocating political reform and changes in national development policies. This policy platform, in other words, seeks to go beyond local problems by explicitly relating them to the national policy arenas and political processes from which they arise. Thus, in 1997 the Assembly submitted an eight point policy platform as part of its petition, calling for substantial changes to development policy. I summarise these policies briefly here, based on the Assembly's petition to the government in 1997 and public relations material they published at the time explaining their petition and policies (1997h; 1997i; Assembly of the Poor, 1997i).

Community Forestry Act

For several years sections of the NGO movement have lobbied for a Community Forestry Act to codify and protect the rights of villagers to use local forest resources, and in 1996 the government prepared a draft after consultation with technocrats, academic experts, development NGOs and forest villagers. In this policy the Assembly demands that the draft act to be implemented into law, and calls for an emphasis on environmental conservation, sustainable forestry, recognition and conservation of biological and human cultural diversity in forests, and ecological sustainability.

Slum Act

Slum dwellers and the NGOs who work with them desire to give them security of dwelling and protect them from "trespassing" and compulsory eviction from their land and dwellings. Hence, the Assembly proposes an act to give existing communities ownership rights over their dwellings, or help them resettle and re-establish new communities in more secure locations. It also advocates community participation in addressing slum problems and developing their communities in cooperation with the state.

Farmers' Rights Act

The Assembly demands greater recognition of the importance of farmers in national development and in conserving and developing plant varieties. It proposes an act to protect small-scale farmers' security of livelihood and the sustainability of the small-

scale agriculture.

Freedom of Information Act

This is a basic platform in the Assembly's campaign for democratic reform, and reform of state-controlled development processes. Freedom of information is advocated as a basic right of the public in a democratic system and essential for making states accountable to their citizens. It should apply to the private sector as well as the state for projects that affect the public.

Independent Court Act

The Assembly of the Poor argues that all its members' problems arise from conflicts between the state and the people. Hence it advocates an independent court as a mechanism to arbitrate such disputes fairly and justly. This was an idea widely discussed during 1997 while the popularly-elected Constitution Drafting Committee was preparing a new constitution for Thailand.

Fair Land Holding and Progressive Tax Policy

The Assembly calls for a policy to discourage non-productive land speculation in order to protect poor people in the city and countryside against loss of land to speculators. It also calls for a progressive land tax system that would place the tax burden on large land owners.

International Policy

The Assembly demands that the government widely publicise international treaties and conventions such as GATT and biological diversity agreements that have effects on the public and farmers. It advocates a review of such agreements, and consultation with the people most affected by them, particularly the rural sector.

Political Reform

Through this policy the Assembly expresses support for the Constitution Drafting Committee and the process of public participation in constitutional reform. It calls for self determination for individuals and communities; for example, community rights in local natural resources management, and for citizens to have greater participation and

voice in government.

Ideology and Social Critique: Contesting Development

For the Assembly, the social critique presented in its petition and documents such as the Mun River Declaration serves to link the localised, material grievances of its members into a cohesive ideological attack on state development policies and practice. This ideological critique is drawn from perspectives and literature on alternative development generated within the Thai and international NGO community (see Chapter 2). Within the Assembly it is written by a handful of NGO activists and academics, who perform the intellectual work of writing petitions, media releases and public relations material. The Assembly consciously and deliberately draws on discourses of environmentalism and human rights that have re-emerged in international currency during the 1990s. This ideological critique links development with social inequality and environmental degradation.

The ideological discourse of the Assembly addresses at least two different audiences. On the one hand it addresses the members of the Assembly themselves, calling on them to recognise their shared problems, political identity and solidarity, and their potential political power. On the other hand the Assembly's published documents seek to advocate on behalf of "the poor" in the public sphere and the state, and engage in ongoing debates about economic development and political reform.

The Assembly argues that the rapid economic development of the last few decades has benefited only a small, privileged minority. It suggests a class-based analysis in their portrayal of Thai society as based on political and economic inequality and exploitation, and the concentration and centralisation of power in the hands of the wealthy. For example, the Mun River Declaration asserts that

Under the dominance of capitalist development and consumerism governments promote a system that benefits only a few at the top. This is closely aligned with the centralisation and concentration of power and authority that enables the easy skimming off of benefits (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

The Assembly asserts that unequal and exploitative power relations in society are the cause of poverty and disadvantage. The Mun River Declaration identifies small farmers

and industrial labourers as subjected to this economic exploitation and oppression:

Until the present day farmers have been oppressed, mistreated, and their means and methods of production exploited, bringing about their bankruptcy, indebtedness and impoverishment... The state, and national and international capitalists see farmers only as tools of production. They skim off the benefits and profits from the market and free trade... Industrial development has brought about a new age of slavery. Labourers are still exploited in a complex and well integrated system where we must work hard to exchange our labour for wages that are not enough to sustain the basic needs of life in environments that are risky to life, health, fitness and mental health (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

In this view the rapid economic and industrial development experienced by Thailand over the previous few decades has mainly served to exacerbate inequalities and economic exploitation. The state, controlled by capitalists and high-ranking state officials, has promoted the hegemony of economic growth and industrial development to the exclusion of other social goals. Within this context, the rural and urban poor, who actually constitute the majority, have been excluded from the benefits of economic development, which accrued instead to capitalists and powerful bureaucrats and served to strengthen their power and privilege. The Mun River Declaration states:

Economic development which is dominated by the industrial sector but ignores the rural agricultural sector has brought about great differences between the incomes of the people in the agricultural sector and those of people outside that sector.... Violent conflict [over resources] arises continuously. These problems are the result of economic development policies determined by capitalists that are not balanced with protecting the welfare of workers (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

In the face of this destructive development which stems from social inequality and exploitation, discourses which appeal to environmental protection, human rights and democracy offer subversive ideologies to attack the hegemony of industrial development and stake out a program for change.

Environmentalism

The environmentalism expressed by the Assembly is principally concerned with defending people's livelihoods and community rights to manage and control local resources such as land and forests. Staking their political claims using the language of environmentalism provides a politically powerful discourse to attack development that resonates with middle class environmentalism expressed in the media. Stated most

baldly, the Assembly asserts that capitalist development and industrialisation have been ecologically destructive and have resulted in a great deal of social conflict over resources:

Industrial development that ignores the quality of life of the people and the ecological balance has caused conflict over natural resources between the rural sector and the urban sector, deterioration of natural resources, and conflict over the administration of land, forests, and water resources in the community (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

The environmental destructiveness of large-scale development is represented very clearly in the section of the Mun River Declaration under the heading “Dams and the Destruction of Ecology and Nature”:

In the 50 years of development of dam technology we have learned a lesson that forests, rivers and communities are destroyed and wiped out. This has been a very expensive lesson about the suffering and hardship of people behind dams, and negative effects on the ecology of rivers and forests. River after river has been destroyed, their fertility destroyed. Can we summarise this lesson yet or not, that using the energy of water to generate electric power, or damming rivers to respond to the needs of consumption that know no limits - is it worth the loss of natural resources and wealth of the environment that should be passed on to generations of our children, and grandchildren to come? (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

The Assembly argues that it is not just poor people's livelihoods at stake, but that distinct “cultures” and “ways of life” are being destroyed. These local cultures are closely associated with people's relationships with their environment. “The different models of state development projects have attacked ordinary ways of life, violated rights in resource management by local communities and destroyed different cultures” (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h).

Against this picture of harmful and unfettered economic development, the Assembly calls for an approach to “sustainable development” based on community rights and local knowledge. The Assembly calls for “natural resources to be used appropriately, and for ecological sustainability for the future of our children, our grandchildren and our country” (*Khaosot* newspaper, 18-3-1997:31). Whereas urban-based, industrial forces have proved insatiable and destructive in their exploitation of natural resources, local communities are based on long-established and sustainable patterns of local resource use. For example, the Mun River Declaration speaks of indigenous, hill-tribe people in these terms:

Native people care for the forest and nature, care for the world's ecology. They have lived in the forest that their forefathers cared for right up to the present day... The forest is their home, their community, their life. The state should accept the truth, accept what can be seen and proved: we tribal people care for the forest and live together with the forest in a balanced and appropriate way.

Therefore, the Assembly argues that "Community Forestry is the solution to conservation and sustainable management of forests" (Assembly of the Poor, 1997i). Both ecological diversity and local communities must be conserved. The Assembly's position is to put the rights of local communities first, in order to "promote the abundance of cultures and traditions of communities, and build processes of cooperation between the state and communities in sustainably conserving the forest" (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h).

Human Rights and Democracy

Discourses of democracy and human rights have become pervasive and closely intertwined in international NGO literature and activism on alternative development. These discourses are central to the Assembly's attacks on state development policies and its ideological project for social change, even if they are not precisely defined or elaborated in detail in campaign documents. The Assembly does not reject the idea of "development" outright, but seeks "participation" in economic growth, the democratisation of Thai politics, and a socially just society that safeguards the rights of its citizens. The Mun River Declaration states that:

Development is a people's right. But it is meaningless unless it is grounded in universal human rights. Without human rights guarantees of freedom of organisation, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, the people will not be able to participate in the development process (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

The discourse of "universal human rights" has come under attack from some Third World activists and academics. Critics such as Esteva and Prakash (1997; 1998:117-119) argue that human rights discourse represents a new form of "cultural imperialism" perpetrated by agencies of Western nations and based on biased claims about the "universal" nature of Western culture and individualism. Indeed, during the few years after issuing the Mun River Declaration the Assembly has shifted towards an emphasis on collective forms of rights and "community rights" in its discourses. Nevertheless, the

human rights discourse gives its members a political language with which to attack abuses of power and defend themselves against exploitation and suppression.

In its 1997 publicity leaflets, the Assembly asserts that its protest is “For community rights, for the environment, and for people everywhere in the country”. State development projects “have attacked ordinary ways of life, violated rights in resource management by local communities and destroyed different cultures”. In response, the Assembly demands that the government “guarantee communities’ rights, especially in the case of community forest. The government must give the duty to manage natural resources to the community” (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h).

Similarly, the language of “participation” (*kan-mi-suan-ruam*) and “democracy” (*prachatipathai*) offers another politically charged discourse that is influential in the international arena and in Thailand. The Assembly of the Poor struggles over the meanings and practice of democracy in several ways. First, it expresses a critique of existing electoral politics in Thailand. It attacks the centralised and hierarchical structure of the Thai state, the domination of electoral politics by a wealthy and powerful elite who rely on vote-buying to gain elected positions, and the exercise of state power to benefit the economic elite and maintain structures of economic inequality and exploitation. In this discursive battle, appeals to democracy are used to criticise the state and legitimate calls for political reform.

Second, at the heart of Assembly struggles to protect its members’ livelihoods and rights over local resources, the movement campaigns for the democratisation of development through institutionalised forms of community participation in decision-making on development projects and policies. The rhetoric of participation in development is central to this campaign. Third, as I mentioned earlier in my discussion of collective leadership, the Assembly endeavours to enact democratic processes within the organisations and networks which constitute it (see Chapter 7).

The Assembly’s public statements attack representative democracy as practised in Thailand and argue that it has not seen a redistribution of power or enabled greater public participation:

The decline of the parliamentary system, deterioration in the

countryside, environmental problems and so on reflect and show the deformity of our representative democracy, the centralization of authority within an inefficient bureaucratic system, and paths of national development that fail to allow public participation. We can't rely on MPs and the government bureaucracy to solve these problems, for we know that they are one part of the problem (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h).

The Assembly's submission to the Constitution Drafting Committee during the period of their protest rally in Bangkok in 1997 provided an important vehicle to advocate the sorts of democratic reforms and changes to the new constitution which would recognise and protect the rights of the "poor". In 1997, during a broad-reaching process of public consultation over the drafting of a new constitution and public debate in the media, the Assembly wrote its own submission which was accepted by the Constitution Drafting Commission (Assembly of the Poor, 1997c).

Furthermore, the Assembly's calls for democratic reform are also expressed in attacks on top-down development projects implemented by the powerful and paternalistic state. As I discuss in Chapter 2, the practice of development has been a central form of domination and exploitation by the state. The concept of "participation" plays a central role in the discourse of democratic reform of development practice. This is expressed most clearly in the Assembly's efforts to protect rights over local resources of community groups within its network. They advocate the institutionalisation of "Public Hearings" (*pracha-phijan*) to enable participation by people whose way of life stands to be affected by state projects. NGOs and academics have been advocating the use of Public Hearings in development planning for several years in an attempt to enable public participation, but most particularly the participation by people affected by proposed development projects in the assessment and decision-making process.

Another central issue in the Assembly's struggle to democratise development is the ongoing campaign and conflict over drafting the Community Forestry Bill to legally clarify and protect collective community rights to use local forests and have authority over them. At the heart of this campaign is a struggle for decentralisation of power and authority over local forest resources to local communities as collective entities.

“Solidarity is Power”: Forging Identity and Solidarity

The Assembly of the Poor brings together a large number of local groups of villagers and slum dwellers. Local material grievances caused by state-sponsored development projects constitute the primary motivation for villagers to participate in Assembly campaigns and protests, and the Assembly utilises this in its approach to campaigning. It is this grounding in local material problems that I argue represents a strength of the Assembly in its ability to mobilise large numbers of people to protest for long periods of time. But it also presents a problem for building solidarity and unity among a number of diverse groups, and constructing a collective identity in the public sphere and in negotiations with the state.

Most of the groups in the Assembly articulate a *local* identity that is linked with claims about a way of life and livelihood faced with destruction by “development”. As Castells (1997:10) argues, for many people their locality offers “the most immediate source of self-recognition and autonomous organization”. Panya Tongyu’s song which begins this thesis represents a good example. When Panya introduces his song as “the history of the Assembly and the Mun River” he claims a special place for his own group’s struggle in the history of the Assembly, but no one group leads the movement. Panya portrays fishing as a way of life, a living culture, as well as a fundamental livelihood strategy, which was destroyed by the Pak Mun Dam. In his song at least, it was fishers, sharing a common way of life and livelihood, who joined together to fight for compensation. Panya’s song expresses identity in multiple and complex ways, of course, that do much more than link him to the Mun River. He sings in the *mo lam* style in Lao, and hence identifies with Isan, the Lao-speaking Northeast, and addresses the Isan majority of the Assembly. But he also invokes Thai nationality as a source of unity with the broader social family and the political right to demonstrate.

The Assembly works at overcoming such localising and fragmenting issues in two ways. First, members of the Assembly enter into a social contract which is underscored by their shared political goal. Second, activists and villagers in the movement articulate and promote a collective identity that also serves as a foundation for expressing a culture of solidarity. In other words, the articulation of a collective identity carries a double role in that it addresses (at least) two audiences – movement insiders in order to integrate and promote solidarity, and outsiders in the public and the state.

The Social Contract

When I asked NGO activists and villagers' leaders what all of the groups in the Assembly shared in common, several replied that, "We all share the same goal" (*mi paomai diawkan*) of pressuring the state to address their petition. This suggests a solidarity based on contingency and political pragmatism. Each group or villagers' organisation that joins the Assembly does so with an undertaking that when it joins in Assembly campaigns, notably protest rallies, it will support the Assembly as a whole and not withdraw or drop out in the event that its particular grievances are resolved (various interviews during protest rally in Bangkok, February & March 1997). This social contract has been particularly important in mobilising the Assembly as a political force. Every villager who joins in a mass protest or some other campaign activity stands to benefit in material ways in terms of their own family's livelihood and welfare. The social contract makes clear that the success of their particular petition is tied to their support for every other group's campaign and continued participation in collective action.

Collective Identity: Representing "the Poor" and "the People"

The Assembly of the Poor is the people, people living in poverty, people facing troubles from government policies, law, the bureaucratic chain of command, and national development that doesn't respect the people, community, culture, or sustainability of resources (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h).

In the Mun River Declaration the Assembly identifies its members as "common people" (*samanchon*) and "poor people" (*khon jon*) who are the "victims of incorrect development". Appealing to the label "common people" is a widespread strategy for many groups opposing state or corporate power throughout the world. To be "common people" asserts that you are not associated with or backed by powerful patrons or vested interests. At the same time it invokes the modern democratic concept of sovereignty resting with and stemming from the people. Therefore, "common people" appeals to ideas of the sovereign powers of citizens, their rights to have a voice in modern liberal democracies and the responsibilities of states to protect them.

There is a strong appeal to Marxist ideas of class relations in the Assembly's representation of "poor people". In their 1997 video "poor people" represent the

“grassroots” but also the primary productive classes of society:

No matter what country in the world, poor people are the largest group in the nation, the most important productive force in society. The importance of poor people is like the grassroots everywhere which are the force which constructs and nourishes a modernising society. But under the development direction that leads our country towards modernity and progress, poor people, the largest portion of our country, have fallen to be the victims of development for a minority to prosper (Assembly of the Poor, 1997j).

Thus, the claim to be “the people”, implies that the Assembly represents (in the sense of ‘stands for’) the popular majority of rural and urban poor.

The title *samatcha khon jon* was deliberately and thoughtfully chosen, apparently by NGO activists. It proved to be very evocative in the media, both Thai and English, especially during the Assembly’s protests in 1996 and 1997. Indeed, these three words carry multiple meanings and connotations with implications for the representation of political identity. I have already mentioned in Chapter 2 the two Northeastern *samatcha* which helped form the Assembly of the Poor: *Samatcha kasettakon rai-yoi* (Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast) and *Samatcha chao-na chao-rai* (Isan Farmers’ Assembly for Protection of Land Rights). These two villagers’ organisations became well-known for demonstrations and protest marches, and the name signals direct continuity with them. Moreover, many NGO activists told me that the word *samatcha* was first used by the Communist Party of Thailand for its general assemblies during the insurgency. Cholthira Satayawathana, a radical Thai academic, believes that this was the case. In the early 1990s when activists chose to name the emerging villagers’ organisations *samatcha*, they invoked that radical history. Indeed, Cholthira believes that “some key persons in almost every *samatcha* had been CPT cadre or at least have had some connection, or been influenced by CPT policy” (email communication, 22-6-1999). Some activists stressed the egalitarian connotations of *samatcha* in terms of a “forum” (*foram, wethi*) where people come together as equals.

An NGO activist told me that the name “Assembly of the Poor” appealed to them because the phrase “Assembly of people suffering from the negative consequences of development” (*samatcha phu thi dai rap phon-krathop jak kan-phattana*) was far too long (Fieldnotes, 24-7-1997, Khong Jiam). Another activist, Wiset, with Friends of the People was probably more to the point. He explained to me that in the lead up to the

1995 conference, “we considered that it would be a network of people who’d all suffered the same fate (*chatakam diawkan*), therefore we got the ‘concept’ of the words ‘poor people’ (*khon jon*) in terms of bringing opportunities (*kan mi orkat*), power (*mi amnat*), and rights (*mi sitthi*) to bargain (*to rong*)” (Interview, Wiset, Bangkok, 2-9-1997). In other words, identifying collectively as “the poor” was seen as a useful political identity from which to launch petitions, demands and negotiations with the state. It could cover all the groups “suffering from the negative consequences of development” but was even more inclusive.

Of course, the assertion of a mass of “poor people” “suffering the consequences of development” is symbolic condemnation of the process of industrialisation and development, highlighting the inequality, inequitable distribution of the benefits of growth, and lending weight to the claim that many have sacrificed for the few to prosper. In Chapter 6 I describe how that symbolism was made into a tangible spectacle during the protest rally in the form of the “Village of the Poor” besieging Government House.

The representation of a collective identity in the “Assembly of the Poor” is part of a struggle to have a right to speak and a right to political activity (i.e. being perceived as a legitimate political agency). The claim to represent “the poor” also presented certain problems or tensions during the course of the Assembly’s campaigns, however. For instance, some sections of the media questioned just how “poor” the protesters were if they could afford to rally in Bangkok for long periods of time. Attacks on their legitimacy were often joined with a claim that they were a “hired mob” (*mop rap jang*) manipulated by some powerful “third hand” (*meu thi-sam*) for cynical political purposes, perhaps an opposition party. This is a long established way in Thai politics of undermining the legitimacy of protesting groups, and is sometimes well founded. Closer to the actual reality, some Members of Parliament announced that they knew who the third hand behind the Assembly protests really was: “NGOs”. Representing the movement as “the poor” has created tensions or problems for how to position the NGO advisers and supporters in relation to the movement, for they can hardly claim to be “poor”, “disadvantaged”, or the “victims of development”.

We cannot argue that the Assembly unambiguously expresses a counter-hegemonic

struggle (as, for instance, does Suthy, 1997). The movement challenges the hegemony of economic development, which has long served to legitimise elite power and control of the state. However, in contrast to the rural-based communist insurgency of a few decades previously, the Assembly does not attack the national symbols of Nation, Religion and King. An ideology of “Thainess” (*khwampenthai*) or national identity (*ekkhalak khong chat*) has long been used by political rulers as a hegemonic discourse to build national unity among a culturally diverse population, legitimise the social order and attack challenges from other social groups (Bowie, 1997; Keyes, 1989; Reynolds, 1991). For example, the Thai state has long regarded communist activity as un-Thai and did its best to associate the insurgency with foreign threats to the Thai nation (Thongchai, 1994).

In fact, the Assembly uses symbols of Nation, Religion and King during its protests (see Photograph 9). Nationalism and religion offer powerful symbolic and ideological resources for constructing collective identity and a culture of solidarity for groups in Thailand. While the Assembly attacks the ideology of development and the authoritarianism of the state, it invokes Thai nationalism in order to stress that this is not a revolutionary or insurgent movement. Rather than attack the basis of Thai nationalism the Assembly invokes it to support its claims and build solidarity. Moreover, the Assembly of the Poor uses appeals to nationalist ideology to reject the ideology of difference and otherness that is often attached to poor protesters from regional Thailand, who are mostly ethnically distinct from the Central Thais of Bangkok, and seek the moral support and sympathy of the public. The words to the *mo lam* song which begins the next chapter provides a good example. The song, performed in Lao by a key leader of the Mun River villagers’ organisation fighting the Pak Mun Dam, marks the Isan identity of the singer and his audience. But at the same time it declares that “We are Thai people, too. Every one of us has the right to speak... What kind of democracy is this!”.

The articulation of collective identity by the Assembly of the Poor, of course, addresses participants as well as an external audience. The rank and file members are asked to recognise themselves and express solidarity with the Assembly. Consider the words to song that was written by a “music for life” folk singer for the Assembly and released on an audio tape during the 1997 protest. The song is titled “Assembly of the Poor for Thai

People” (*Samatcha khon jon pheua khon thai*) and was broadcast repeatedly throughout the rally site:

*Nation, religion, king are the wealth that binds us
They have great meaning and importance, enduring and secure
This solidarity is power
Thai creativity still has value
We'll combine our blood and flesh, sacrifice our lives
For Thais everywhere, for democracy...
Assembly of the Poor will resist to the death
Assembly of the Poor will resist to the ends of our lives
Assembly of the Poor will endure for Thai people
Assembly of the Poor will fight for Thai people
(from audio tape *Samatch khon jon LIVE*, published by Assembly of the Poor 1997).*

The articulation of these ideologies that address members of the Assembly and encourage them to recognise their shared identity, are important, but as I will show, shared experiences and the stories developed about those shared experiences - especially in the protest - also become central to developing collective identity and solidarity. The experience of mobilisation, collective action and protest plays a central part in participants developing a culture of solidarity (see Chapter 6). In other words, solidarity and identity are continually constructed and renegotiated.

Conclusion

The ability of the Assembly to mobilise large numbers of people in protest campaigns stems from its grounding in *local* struggles. Material grievances provide the fundamental motivation for members of communities to get involved, and the Assembly's written petitions to the government combine the details of each specific, local grievance. Moreover, for many of these groups the primary source of a collective identity on which to base their struggles is their *local* community and relationships with place and environment. That is because the social impacts of development projects such as dams, or moves by state agencies to assert control over land and forests, are experienced by villagers in their own locality. However, in arguing that this represents a strength of the Assembly, I have also explored how it attempts to overcome the fragmenting impetus of linking diverse, locally-grounded conflicts into a country-wide movement able to campaign at a national level.

One aspect of this is the Assembly's efforts to express an overarching ideological

critique of development processes and policies, that explicitly relates specific, material problems to the national context of state development policy and social structures of inequality. Another aspect is the expression of a unifying oppositional identity based on a “common context of struggle” (see Callahan, 1998; Mohanty, 1991) and thus able to incorporate diversity. The assertion of collective identity in symbolic and ideological terms addresses both outsiders (such as the government in Assembly petitions) and members of the Assembly, seeking to have them recognise their shared interests and political project.

I have presented a broad overview of the make-up, structure and ideology of the Assembly in this chapter. In order to demonstrate how the development of villagers’ organisations mobilising around local issues constitutes the foundation of the Assembly, in the following chapter I turn to an ethnographic case study of the emergence and activities of the Mun River Villagers’ Committee and its campaign against the Pak Mun Dam.

4 The Rise of a Villagers' Movement: A Case Study of The Mun River Villagers' Committee

*Fisher folk, don't hurry to escape on your separate ways!
Every single one went to find the government
And present them with the truth
They told us the dam didn't destroy the fish
We, who knew first, knew the rapids when the river began to quicken
We are Thai people, too
Every one of us has the right to speak,
Not to argue over the right place and the wrong place
What kind of democracy is this!*

(Extract from "The Story of Pak Mun People's Struggle" a *mo lam* song by *Pho Siang*⁶, Chair of the Mun River Villagers' Committee, recorded during interview, 2-7-1997, Khong Jiam)

In Chapter 2 I outlined the historical origins of the Assembly of the Poor, arguing that rapid economic growth and industrial development, especially since the early 1980s, caused a crisis in the countryside as local people were increasingly drawn into conflicts over land, forests and other resources throughout rural Thailand. This chapter explores how this crisis in the countryside stimulated instances of grassroots collective action in opposition to centrally-controlled development through a case study of the Pak Mun Dam campaign. I illustrate how top-down, authoritarian approaches to development, in this case dam construction, have seen local villagers respond collectively, build organisations to mount their campaigns and also seek out allies in NGOs and other sectors of the middle class.

The story of grassroots opposition to the Pak Mun Dam, organised and developed through the Mun River Villagers' Committee, not only represents an example of local, collective action in opposition to state-led development. This villagers' organisation became a core group in the Assembly of the Poor, and has created a thriving centre of opposition and activism on a range of development issues in Ubon Ratchathani province. Furthermore, many of the NGO activists in the Assembly have a long association and experience with the Pak Mun dam campaign. A close study of the

⁶ *Pho* is a fictive kin term in Thai and Lao meaning "father" and is used here as a polite title.

history and development of the Mun River Villagers' Committee gives us an insight into the history and development of the Assembly of the Poor as a whole.

Perspectives on Grassroots Action

In this chapter I explore the links between development, environment and collective grassroots action, based on accounts and oral histories from local villagers and NGO activists. I try to show just how complex local responses to development and the processes of organising collective action can be, as they reflect local power structures and socio-economic differentiation. This attention to the complexity and social differentiation of grassroots responses to development has been lacking in the political ecology literature. Villagers and the poor are often portrayed in political ecology literature in a rather simplistic and uniform way. That is, they are seen as all being affected uniformly by development and environmental change, and therefore responding collectively as a mass. If grassroots collective actors have become so important, then we need more anthropological detail about local social processes in the building and development of grassroots organisations and movements.

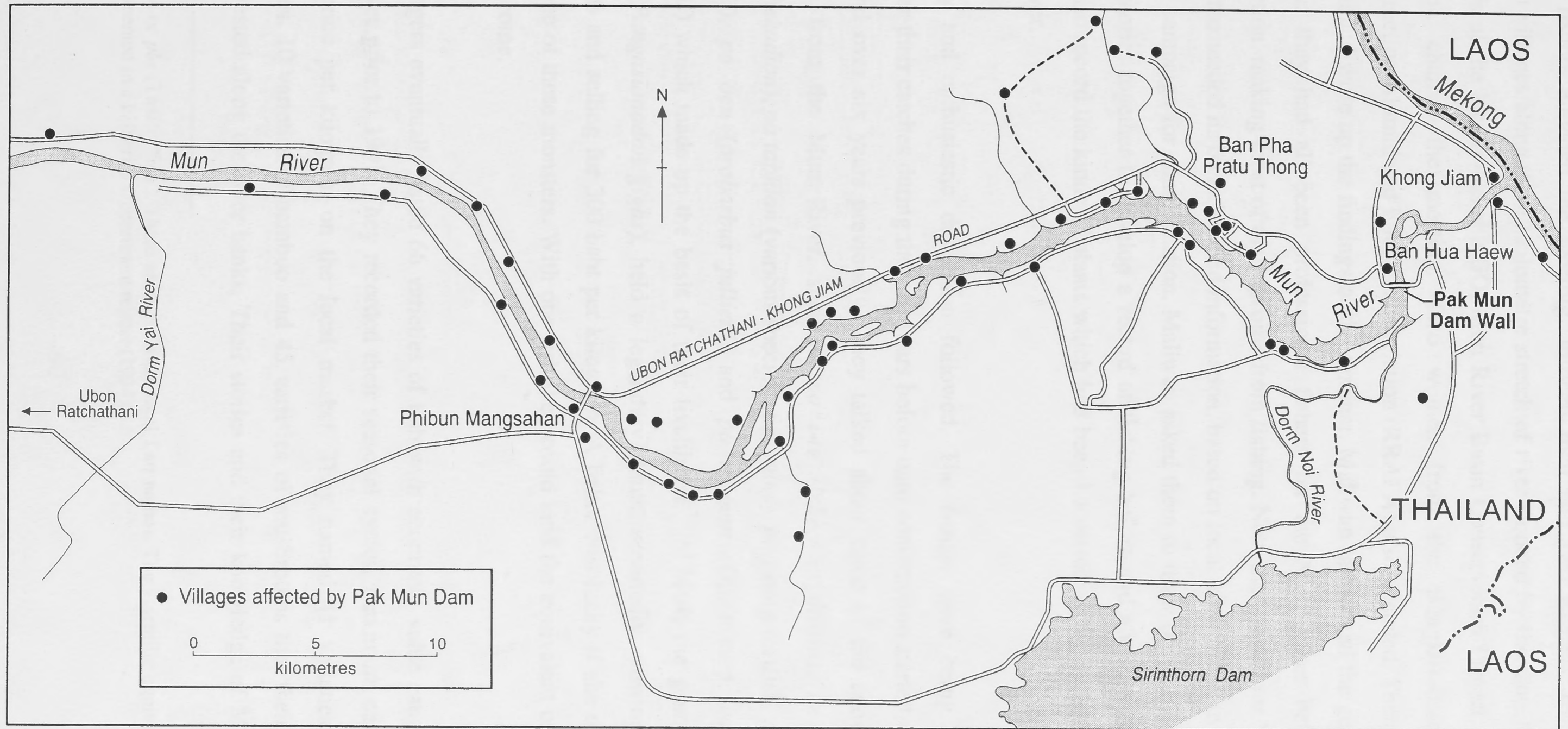
In the case of the Pak Mun Dam it was not a foregone conclusion that an organised, broad-based villagers' movement would emerge to oppose the dam. Government agencies and officials disseminated pro-dam propaganda, restricted information and used ideological and coercive means to promote local support for the dam project and suppress dissent. The dam project divided the community, and many people such as village-level officials, stood to gain. Also, the social base of the villagers' opposition movement, and their activities and goals, changed over time as the dam project progressed and its environmental consequences began to be felt. Increasing numbers of villagers joined the local anti-dam organisation, partly because of the growing local perceptions of the dam's adverse impact on the riverine environment and local livelihoods, but also partly because of the limited successes and gains won by the opposition movement. The villagers' opposition organisation acquired a momentum of its own. It grew in terms of membership but also stimulated organised opposition and campaigns on other local issues. Most notable of these was the emergence of an organised villagers' campaign for fair compensation for the effects of the Sirinthorn Dam, constructed almost three decades earlier.

Everyday Life and Livelihood Before the Dam

The Mun River rises on the heights of Khao Yai Mountain in the Sankambeng Range and flows eastwards across North-east Thailand. Along with its tributary, the Chi River, it drains 75 percent of the region, and constitutes the major tributary of the Mekong River inside Thailand (Donner, 1978). The Mun River joins the Mekong at the township of Khong Jiam in Ubon Ratchathani Province. Until recently Khong Jiam was famous for its spectacular views across the expanse of water called the *mae nam song si*, the “two coloured river”, where the blue waters of the Mun mingled with the brown, muddy waters of the Mekong. Across the Mekong rise up the thickly forested hills of Laos. This is the *pak mun*, the “mouth of the Mun.”

Life in the village communities located along the lower Mun River in the Districts of Phibun and Khong Jiam has long been “bound up with the river”. Along a stretch of some 40 kilometres from the river’s mouth at Khong Jiam to Phibun Mangsahan township are located about 55 villages on or near the river’s banks (see Map 2). Many of these villages were originally settled about 227 years ago, with a second wave of settlement about 177 years ago (Buchidta, 1997:41). The land is mostly poor and infertile for cash crops or rice farming, and some villages have no farmland at all, but depended entirely on fishing for their income. Among the communities closest to the river many villagers would trade fish for rice and other produce from other villages, to the extent that a common local saying was “Go carrying fish, return carrying rice” (*pai hap pla ma hap khao*).

My first introduction to stories of life and livelihoods along the Mun River before and after the dam came in November 1996 on my first visit to the Mun River Villagers’ Centre, over two years after completion of the Pak Mun Dam. My wife and I were invited to attend a meeting of fishers at the Villagers’ Centre in Pha Pratu Thong Village, Khong Jiam, as observers (Fieldnotes 20-11-1996). Before the meeting began, a wiry old grandfather showed us the Centre’s collection of traditional fishing gear and traps, housed in a dilapidated bamboo hut (which NGO staff based in the Centre ironically call a “museum”, *phiphithaphan*). He explained how to use the caste nets (*hae*) and gill nets (*mong khai*) and demonstrated the workings of bamboo baskets (*jip*) and bamboo fish traps such as the large *tum*.



Map 2. The lower Mun River, showing locations of villages affected by the Pak Mun Dam.

Fifteen fishers attended the meeting, thirteen men and two women, from fifteen different villages along the 40 kilometre stretch of river flooded by the dam. Two staff members of the locally-based NGO, Mun River Basin Conservation Project, Maliwan and Noi, chaired the meeting. Two women from the Bangkok-based Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Association (RRAFA) also attended. Their role was to record and write up the findings of the seminar. Maliwan introduced the goals to the villagers: they had all been professional fishers on the Mun River before dam construction, making most of their income from fishing. Now the Mun River Villagers' Committee needed its own data and information, based on local knowledge, to use in its ongoing campaign for compensation. Maliwan asked them to draw on their experience and memories together to develop a record of fishing before and after the dam. They would also record the kinds of plants which had been harvested along the banks of the Mun River.

A lively and enthusiastic discussion followed. The fishers were being asked to remember their catches during the two years before dam construction started, 1989 and 1990, and over six years previously. They talked about some of the common fish varieties from the Mun River, such as *pa i-tu* (*labeo erythrurus*, or *morulius chrysophekadion*), *pa taphian* (various species of *puntius*), *pa peung* (catfish, *pangasius larnaudii*), *pa oen* (*probarbus jullieni*) and *pa ka-man* (Giant carp, *catlocarpio siamensis*) which made up the basis of their livelihood.⁷ *Pa beuk*, the giant Mekong catfish (*Pangasianodon gigas*), held a legendary status, reportedly growing up 300 kilograms and selling for 300 baht per kilogram. A fisher was lucky if she or he ever caught one of these monsters. With one fish they could land the equivalent of a whole year's income.

The villagers eventually listed 66 varieties of fish with economic value caught in the Mun River prior to 1991. They recorded their seasonal cycles, maximum catches and selling price per kilogram on the local market. They named 41 varieties of wild vegetables, 10 varieties of bamboo and 45 varieties of mushrooms that their families had harvested along the river banks. Their stories and their knowledge of Mun River

⁷ *Pa* (Lao) or *pla* (Thai): "fish". These are almost all local Lao names. The scientific equivalents have been documented in a Fisheries Department report (1994).

fishing ecology underscored the variety and abundance of natural resources yielded by the river. By mid-afternoon, Maliwan was ready to move on to the second part of the agenda that she had set them. What was the situation like now that the dam was finished? Of the fish they had recorded, which could be caught now?

The meeting fell into a bemused silenced. They had all stopped fishing as a commercial activity. The variety and sizes of fish could not be caught in the river upstream from the dam any more, they said. The sites where wild vegetables, mushrooms and bamboo could be harvested had all been flooded.

In dozens of interviews that I conducted over the following year, villagers living along the Mun River told the same story. Siang, an office holder in the Mun River Villagers' Committee, summed it up as follows:

Most people in Khong Jiam had two prominent ways of making a living: first fishing, second rice farming. Rice farming for our own consumption. After working the rice fields, most villagers go fishing. This has been our culture since our ancestor's time. It is our identity. Almost every family depended on these economic means to allow us to accumulate assets within the family and make our lives better. Then in 1991 they started building the dam. They had to blast away the rapids to construct a water channel. The local fishers thought that this would have a direct effect on the fish. During the period of construction our catches declined, it was hard to catch fish. We realised when they built the dam that it would be certain to adversely affect our brothers and sisters living along both banks of the Mun River, because our way of life was bound up with the river (Interview, *Pho Siang*, Wang Mai Village, Khong Jiam, 2-7-1997).

The coming of the dam changed the way that stories were told about life on the Mun River. As can be seen in the account of the fishers' seminar above, many Mun River villagers have been actively reconstructing the past for political reasons. Many now tell their stories as part of their collective attack on the dam project and their claims for compensation. This is not to say that their accounts are not true to their own experiences, but that they are now used for a new purpose, even when told to a foreign researchers like myself, and we need to take this into account. They have become "before the dam" stories. *Mae Daeng*,⁸ another leading figure in the Mun River

⁸ *Mae* is a polite title for older women in Isan meaning "mother" in Thai and Lao.

Villagers' Committee, told me her family's experience:

Before the dam we fished and worked like this [making brooms]... If my children came, me and father and my children would go fishing when we felt like it. If it was the right season. We would fish during the months of May and August as those were the times when you could catch the most. Those times we could make money to use for the rest of the year. 1000, 2000 baht a day, 40 to 50 kilograms of fish each day. For our family. After that we saved for a better fish net. And we bought fish from other villagers nearby and made profits of about 3 to 4000 all year round. I didn't work my rice fields at all...I have rice fields but the land is not very fertile (*Mae Daeng*, Interview, Wang Sabaeng Tai Village, Khong Jiam 23-9-1997).

Research findings from both state agencies and environmental NGOs support local people's own accounts. But it is important to emphasise that very little systematic, scientific study of Mun River fisheries or their economic importance to local people was undertaken before dam construction. Certainly, the potential effects of the dam on pre-existing fisheries were not assessed. The agency responsible for the dam, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), did commission a study of fisheries resources on the lower Mun River that was published in May 1991, well before dam construction started. This study found that 99% of village households sampled go fishing, and on average derived an income of 5576 baht per year from fishing (Theerapat et al 1991, cited in Chalotorn, 1994). A belated survey of 161 households in eleven villages by the Department of Fisheries in 1994 estimated that fishing families consumed about 38 baht of fish a day and sold an average of 340 baht of fish per day. On average the families surveyed had fished for 252 days each year before dam construction (Fisheries Department, 1994).

Similarly, a survey of 291 families in 11 villages by the environmental NGO, Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), underscored the economic importance of Mun River fisheries. PER found that before dam construction 81% of families depended on the river fisheries for livelihood, either for subsistence consumption or income generation. 73% of fishing families surveyed sold some of their catch to generate income in 1990. Fishers reported their own consumption at 1.5 kg per day per family in 1989 and 1990. The commercial catch during those years averaged 9 kilograms per day per family; and these families made on average 218 baht per day of fishing (Project for Ecological Recovery, 1993).

The Pak Mun Dam Project

The Pak Mun Dam is located near the mouth of the Mun River at Hua Haew Village, four kilometres upstream from the river's confluence with the Mekong. Feasibility studies of the site for a hydroelectric dam to provide power for the Northeast region had been made since 1970 (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, 1984). Pak Mun is a "run-of-the-river" hydropower dam. "This means that, unlike a normal storage-type dam, Pak Mun does not hold a large stagnant lake of water" (World Bank, 1994:5). Instead, the dam holds back a much lower "head" of water while relying on a fast flow through the hydropower dynamos. Pak Mun is the first "run-of-the-river" type dam ever constructed in Thailand. It consists of a dam wall 17 metres high, containing a reservoir which has submerged about 66 square kilometres, "most of which would normally have been submerged during the annual wet season floods" (World Bank, 1994:5). The dam affects water levels in the river for over 40 kilometres upstream from the wall. The maximum water level is 108 metres above sea level.

EGAT claimed that the "run-of-the-river" style of the dam would have a minimal environmental and social impact as it would only raise the river to levels just above the normal rainy season flood levels anyway (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, 1982; 1984). In their project proposal EGAT actually claimed that an additional benefit of the dam, apart from hydroelectricity production, would be an increase in fishery production in the dam reservoir. EGAT based this prediction on studies of fishery production in seven other existing large dams in Thailand, but they had no comparative data on "run-of-the-river" style dams. Moreover, EGAT consistently ignored or under-emphasised the economic importance of the pre-existing fisheries along the lower Mun River in their cost-benefit analysis and EIA, even though they had conducted fishery surveys prior to construction (Chalotorn, 1994).

The cabinet of former Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan approved the Pak Mun Dam Project in April 1989 with the EGAT as the implementing agency. EGAT justified the Pak Mun Dam as providing a source of renewable and sustainable hydroelectric energy which was needed to supply Thailand's rapidly growing energy demands at a time of rapid economic growth and industrialisation. At that time Thailand's energy needs were growing at 1000 megawatts per year, of which the Pak Mun project would

provide 136 megawatts (World Bank, 1994). EGAT also claimed that it would be a “dual purpose” dam, providing both hydroelectricity and water for irrigation, but EGAT has never included any irrigation component in the project’s budget. Moreover, the feasibility of EGAT’s proposed irrigation scheme has been called into question and it now seems unlikely that an integrated irrigation scheme will ever be developed for the Pak Mun Dam (Chalotorn, 1994). EGAT estimated that the project would cost a total of US\$230 million and applied to the World Bank for a loan of US\$23 million, ten percent of the total cost.

After approval of the project, the public, NGOs and media found it very difficult to get access to information from EGAT about the numbers of village households who would be displaced by the dam. Apparently in order to pre-empt opposition to the project EGAT consistently down-played the size and impact of the dam, claiming in their submissions to the cabinet in 1990 that only 262 families would need to be resettled (Anurak, 1996) and that the dam would have little effect on the river’s flow or riverine environment. EGAT began construction in May 1991. The World Bank finally approved its loan in December 1991 (see below). Construction of the dam wall was completed and hydropower production began with one generator in June 1994 (*Bangkok Post*, Reuters Database, 12 June 1994).

The dam Resettlement Plan, prepared for EGAT as part of the EIA process, reported that 278 households would need to be relocated, based on survey data from 1984 (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, 1984). During the construction period protests and media reports continually forced EGAT to acknowledge growing numbers of affected and displaced villagers. By the time construction and inundation was completed in June 1994, 1821 families in thirty-one villages had received financial compensation for the flooding of their houses and/or land or been resettled (*Bangkok Post*, Reuters Database, The dam’s done, conflict’s not, 3 July 1994).

Emergence of Local Opposition

In many villages along the lower Mun River which stood to be affected by the dam, EGAT and other state officials carried out an intensive public relations exercise to promote support for the dam, and manage and suppress the emergence of opposition (see also Hubbel, 1992). EGAT withheld accurate information about the maximum

water levels to be flooded. At the same time they disseminated pro-dam propaganda which under-estimated and down-played the eventual extent of local flooding, and gave assurances that the few villagers affected would be suitably compensated. Local authorities such as Village Heads and Tambon⁹ Heads (called *kamnan*) were instructed to use their authority to prohibit expressions of opposition. Once the villagers opposition campaign commenced and started to attract media attention, government and EGAT officials consistently denied the legitimacy of the demonstrators (Hubbel, 1992), claiming that they were outsiders or paid by outsiders. EGAT and their allies in the provincial and local authorities used the strict application of the law to suppress dissent. In the face of such a concerted campaign to suppress and disorganise the villagers' capacity for organised opposition, one question I address here is how a local organised opposition movement emerged among the villagers at all.

A range of influential people and officials at local, district, provincial and national levels stood to gain from the dam project and hence were determined to circumvent and suppress opposition. Buchidta (1997) argues that EGAT formed an alliance with the Provincial administration and an Ubon-based Member of Parliament to push for the dam. According to villagers, this group also found an ally in a local *kamnan*, who owned a construction contracting business. Villagers claim that these "influential people" (*phu mi itthiphon*) paid people to demonstrate in support of the dam and violently harass and threaten anti-dam groups.

EGAT's publicity campaign was most intense in villages closest to the proposed construction site at Ban¹⁰ Hua Haew. Villagers from Ban Huay Hai, two kilometres upstream from the dam site, recalled that many of them initially believed that the dam would bring great benefits to the local communities. EGAT promised that the dam project would bring jobs for young people, and create improved fisheries. EGAT guaranteed new and better infrastructure for villagers who had to resettle, and took them on study tours to other dams, "but didn't stop to give us time to talk with people there" (Fieldnotes, 1-8-1997, Khong Jiam).

⁹ *Tambon*, a Thai word, is sometimes translated as "sub-district". It means an administrative unit usually consisting of ten to twelve administrative villages. Tambon heads are called *kamnan*.

¹⁰ Ban means "village".

Mae Bun, who was to play an important role in organising and leading the villagers opposing the dam, recounted how the dam project was announced in her village right next to the construction site, Ban Hua Haew:

In 1989 they first started publicising the dam in our village. The Village Head called for each household to send a person to a meeting. So I went to listen. He said they were going to bring a dam project to Ban Hua Haew. 'Our village will become a town (*meuang*) in the future', he said. That Village Head said that the state would bring abundance and prosperity (*khwam udom sombun*) to us. 'I want the villagers to understand. I won't have one single person oppose this in our village, Ban Hua Haew,' he said. 'Our village is located in the hills, therefore they sympathise and will bring a dam to restore water, bring electricity for us,' he said. 'So I'd like to call on my brothers and sisters of our village to co-operate and support this project,' he said. 'If any person loses anything they don't have to have regrets, the state won't neglect them. They say the state is like a father,' he said. 'But if anyone loses anything they will compensate that person. But I won't allow any opposition; it's not like the Sirinthorn Dam. The Sirinthorn Dam was the Irrigation Department. This is a state enterprise. And this time they won't allow the people to oppose or resist, not one single person... If our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters support this, we'll be rewarded. So everyone agrees with this project. If you agree please clap your hands like this.' So they all clapped in answer. I was the only one who didn't. The village head said, '*Mae yai* [grandmother], you didn't clap your hands with everyone, if you have any worries please explain them. I have received orders from the district office and the provincial office, so I must explain to them why you didn't clap your hands.'

Agree or don't agree with the project, I'll explain. Take Sirinthorn Dam as an example, not far from Ban Hua Haew. How many more dams are they going to build on top of that? (I spoke in our language [Lao].) It's not necessary to bring any more, I said. Because I see very clearly - Sirinthorn Dam - I see how much sorrow and hardship they have. People suffer from dam construction, no matter whether it's by a state enterprise or irrigation project it has the same characteristics, dams the water and floods rice fields, crops, fences, gardens, houses, everything that the community can see near the river. This is what villagers lose. But the state gains, yes. They don't allow opposition, but they get the benefits...

The village head said, 'I'm going to ask you, do you agree? Do you agree with the project I've just announced?'

If I have to say whether I agree or not, if I have to say what's in my heart about dam construction, then I'll say out loud I don't agree with building a dam near the village.

A district official was there and he asked my name then, my second name, and my house number. So I told him and he wrote it down. Then

he explained all the benefits - only good things. 'Our country lacks electric power, we have to use electricity from Laos,' he talked like that.

I said I wanted to say one more thing. I don't oppose the way of development, but I want the state to be certain about the costs and benefits for villagers. I didn't oppose it, I spoke about my reasons and they held that this was opposition... Later after the meeting the village head came to my house to persuade me not to talk like that if he [the district official] came again. I argued with him here.

I work weaving brooms and mats to sell. At that time we would sit together as a group weaving, talking together. The villagers [in that group] didn't understand. They said that they would arrest you for sure (Interview, *Mae Bun*, Hua Haew Village, 3-8-1997).

Mae Bun's account vividly illustrates the alliance between EGAT and local level authorities in their attempts to head off any village-based opposition. As will be obvious, *Mae Bun* is a highly articulate and confident speaker in her own language. She was 50 years old in 1989, a mother of six, who had lived in Ban Hua Haew most of her life. As she points out, even simply daring to express her negative opinion about the dam was taken as opposition. Many of her friends and fellow villagers were unwilling to speak or act against the dam at this early stage as they were unsure of their legal rights and feared arrest if they publicly objected. *Mae Bun*, and others like her who I met in other villagers, were not only sceptical about the state propaganda, but were confident enough to express their concerns and criticisms, and provide arguments against the dam and the beginnings of an opposition discourse.

After that first meeting, the village head tried to exclude *Mae Bun* from further meetings about the dam. But she set about building a network of people from nearby villages who also opposed the project, and also sought advice and allies from professional and middle class people outside the local area. Here kinship and friendship networks proved to be crucial. *Mae Bun* visited a close friend in nearby Ban Tung Lung, another woman of her generation, and together they started building a network of villagers against the dam. She went to Khong Jiam township to consult with a nephew who had studied law. He suggested she consult with lawyers at the Union for Civil Liberties office in Ubon city, where she also had plenty of relatives who provided accommodation. She also contacted Isara Noi, an Ubon-based lawyer and former MP, who became an important ally and advocate for the anti-dam villagers during the early stages of the conflict.

Many other villagers first heard about the dam project through the media, particularly the government-controlled radio station. *Mae Daeng* recalled:

The first I heard about it was on the radio and in the newspapers. They announced that the Pak Mun Dam would be constructed. Surveys had been completed already. The dam would bring great benefits. Villagers started feeling dissatisfied. We hurried to meet and talk with each other. We rode our bicycles to spread the word around. They said the dam would be good, and wouldn't have any effects within villages. The first rallies there were only villagers... but we were scattered and disorganised at that time (Interview, Ban Wang Sabaeng Tai, 23-9-1997).

Mae Daeng was about forty years old at that time in 1989. A mother of three, she had been participating in village development activities and various village committees for the previous twenty years, and had already fallen out with her village head several times because of her outspokenness. An opposition network slowly coalesced around villagers like *Mae Daeng* and *Mae Bun*, who became local leaders within their own villages and key organisers within the network. As I mentioned above, kinship and friendship networks, which linked families from different villages along the river, played an important part.

In Ban Hua Haew, Ban Huay Hai and many other villages the dam controversy quickly divided the community between pro-dam villagers allied with the Village Heads, and anti-dam villagers. Village Heads and *kamnan*, who were under pressure from their superiors to enforce compliance with state authority in the village, also found themselves in a position to exploit their fellow villagers affected by the dam project. For example, all compensation claims to EGAT for land or house plots to be flooded by the dam had to be submitted through the Village Head and Kamnan. According to villagers, many of them demanded a percentage of the compensation pay out before they would register each villager's claim. Up to 80 percent of villagers whose land or houses would be flooded held no land title documents (World Bank, 1994) and this put them in a weak and vulnerable position to oppose or negotiate with EGAT.

By May 1991 the opposition villagers' network included representatives from 20 villages along the lower Mun River in Khong Jiam and Phibun districts. In an effort to formalise their growing network of villagers and improve their organisational capacity

to campaign they established the Love the Mun River Group (Lao: *klum hak mae mun*). The founding chairman of the Group, a villager from Ban Sai Mun, Khong Jiam District, said that, "Mostly, it is a chance for villagers to gain confidence to oppose the dam, local officials and police, and EGAT. When villagers are threatened, or when the village groups have a problem, the Group is a good place to come" (quoted in Hubbel, 1992:68). The following year (1992) the organisation changed its name to the Mun River Villagers' Committee for Rehabilitation of Life and Community (*Khanakamakan chao-ban pheua feunfu chewit lae chumchon lum nam mun*).

As I noted above, construction of the Pak Mun dam started in May 1991 and continued over the following three years or so. Whereas during the previous two years local opposition had been primarily based in the seven or eight villages closest to the dam site, events during construction and then the eventual completion of the dam only helped to galvanise growing numbers of villagers to join in protest rallies and other activities of the Mun River Villagers' Committee. One turning point in the attitudes of local people came when EGAT began blasting the rapids downstream of the dam wall to construct a run-off channel within Kaeng Tana National Park in April 1992. The explosions and tremors were heard for several kilometres and local fishers became concerned about the effects of the blasting on nearby fish and fish migration past the blasting site (various interviews, including Winai, Head of Huay Haew Village, 1-8-1997; Siang, 2-7-1997). The villagers' organisation reached its greatest strength numerically after the dam was completed, as the river banks were flooded for some 40 kilometres and the loss of the fishing grounds started to be felt among the local people. By the end of 1994 some 2500 families from 53 villages had joined the organisation's activities.

NGO and Student Activists

The most important allies of the Mun River villagers in the campaign, first against the dam, and then later for fair compensation, were NGOs and student activists. NGOs pushed the campaign into national and international arenas, provided advice, encouragement, information and resources to support the villagers' organisations' campaign. As mentioned above, a lawyer and former-MP, Isara Noi, also became an early advocate and ally of the anti-dam villagers, encouraging them to organise together to oppose the dam and reassuring them that this was their legal right. Isara gained

widespread admiration and support in the area for his public stand against the dam, and campaigned in the national elections promising to oppose the dam once elected. Once successfully re-elected, however, Isara backed out of the campaign.

In 1989 Isara and the Union for Civil Liberties helped organise the Pak Mun Dam Opposition Campaign Committee, which also included representatives of villagers, small business owners from Phibun township, and NGOs. As Buchidta (1997) reports, the committee's goal was to coordinate the efforts of NGOs, academics, students and others with the villagers' campaign. This committee linked the opposition villagers to national environmental NGOs such as the Wildlife Foundation of Thailand and the Project for Ecological Recovery (PER). With sponsorship from such NGOs the committee produced leaflets and media releases to publicise the anti-dam campaign. At this stage the key arguments against the dam were that it would destroy villagers' farmland and local forest, worsen the effects of periodic flooding on the lower Mun River, cause schistosomiasis outbreaks, destroy fish diversity in the whole river system, destroy the rivers' rapids which were a natural tourist attraction, and affect the lifestyle and culture of local Mun River communities (Pak Mun Dam Opposition Campaign Committee & Wildlife Fund Thailand, no date).

The relationship between local villagers and NGO activists developed as local people built their opposition network. NGO and student activists had encouraged the villagers to establish the Love the Mun River Group in order to formalise and better organise their campaign. The Director of PER at the time said:

An organised, village-level network opposed to Pak Moon allowed PER the opportunity to receive information from throughout the Pak Moon project area and beyond. [The Group] marked the beginning of a villager-NGO partnership that served to make the villagers' voice heard in Isaan, Bangkok, and Washington. Maybe this was the most important thing about the villagers' groups (quoted in Hubbel 1992:71).

PER organised seminars in Bangkok universities and invited academics, technical experts and government technocrats, as well as local village representatives to discuss the dam effects. Through their campaign against the Nam Choan Dam in the mid-1980s they had already built links with international environmental organisations, such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and the International Rivers Network, which began international campaigns against the Pak Mun Dam, focusing especially on World Bank

funding.

PER also employed activists and volunteers at the local level in Ubon to work closely with the villagers' organisation and its leaders. One of these activists was Maliwan, who was to have a great influence on NGO strategies and the anti-dam campaign. She first came to the Mun River in 1991. During her time with PER Maliwan worked with two local communities threatened by large dams, Kaeng Sua Ten in Northern Thailand and the Mun River in the Northeast.

Maliwan decided to devote her energies full-time to the Pak Mun campaign. She resigned from PER and established a small, locally-based NGO, called the Mun River Basin Conservation Project, to support the Mun River villagers' campaign at the local level. At first Maliwan and a handful of other activists and volunteers worked out of a rented house in Phibun township, which served as headquarters for the NGO and villagers' organisation. Later, they moved to a cluster of small bamboo shacks that they built themselves on land donated by villagers in Ban Pha Pratu Tong.

Campaigns and Protests

Obviously, the villagers' and NGO's campaign was unable to stop the dam. But in the process they built a well-organised and broad-based local villagers' organisation, cultivated experienced local leaders and built alliances and networks with other villagers' organisations and NGOs. For many of the NGO activists and village organisers the Pak Mun dam campaign gave them experience and skills that they have applied more broadly within the Assembly of the Poor.

There were several important turning points in their campaign, which related roughly to the stages of the dam project and the campaign to stop World Bank funding. As I note throughout, the conflict over Pak Mun Dam raged at a number of levels, from the local to the international, and involved a number of different social actors, from local villagers to the World Bank, but this chapter focuses primarily on the role and experience of local villagers. This social group constituted the social foundation of the campaign, both numerically in terms of their membership, but also in terms of an ideologically constructed legitimacy to speak about the local social and environmental effects of the dam.

Stop the Dam!

For almost four years the villagers aimed to stop the dam altogether, and pursued this goal long after construction began. To this end, they submitted letters and petitions to authorities, despatched delegations to lobby MPs, state officials and the World bank, organised demonstrations and protest marches, and sought to gain publicity in the media. Villagers' leaders and their NGO advisers believed that if a realistic assessment of the effects of the dam was made public, the government would be forced to cancel it. They petitioned the government to suspend the project and enable villagers and NGOs to participate in a review of the social and environmental impacts. At the same time, they continually fought for greater transparency and public access to information in EGAT's implementation process.

The villagers found that conventional methods such as written submissions and signed petitions were largely ineffective. EGAT and the government mostly ignored them or made empty promises as token gestures of appeasement. This reinforced the villagers' feeling of total exclusion from participation or influence in decisions about the dam. The rallying cry of many NGOs at the time - that local people must participate democratically in making decisions about development projects that directly affect them - held great appeal to local Mun River people. They staged a series of demonstrations to gain media attention and force EGAT and state officials to negotiate on the villagers' grievances. These rallies and demonstrations became the most well-known and public face of their activities. They also proved to be their most effective and successful strategy for gaining recognition and concessions from EGAT and the state. Between the announcement in 1989 and completion of the dam in 1994 they rallied dozens of times in strategic locations, ranging from the dam site itself, the district markets in Phibun, the Ubon provincial offices, to Government House in Bangkok (Various interviews, see also Buchidta, 1997). From the start villagers endeavoured to stage nonviolent, peaceful rallies, and to a large extent this tactic was chosen in order to avoid giving the police justification to intervene, but also because physical conflict and violence were poorly regarded by the media. Nevertheless, several demonstrations erupted into violence as pro-dam demonstrators and police clashed with the opposition villagers.

Villagers' leaders such as Siang and Daeng talked about the importance of culture as a rallying point and tactic. As Siang said to me:

The Pak Mun Dam struggle has been not only a struggle over information, it has been a cultural struggle, a struggle on many fronts. It's been not only a contest of strength, there have been many methods of struggle. A good example is culture (*wathanatham*), which we linked in with our campaign. We incorporated all of the *hit sip song khlong sip si* (12 annual festivals, 14 traditional laws) (Interview, Wang Mai Village, 2-7-1997).

The "twelve annual festivals, fourteen traditional laws" that Siang refers to make up a central element of Isan village culture and identity.¹¹ For the most part they represent important Buddhist festivals which bring villagers together to make merit. The anti-dam villagers began using these festivals as opportunities to promote their arguments against the dam and recruit local people. Some local cultural practices were also used to express opposition and assert villagers' claims over the environment as guardians of the spirits of the place. For example, in May 1990 about 700 villagers and students rallied at the Kaeng Sapeu rapids, a local tourist attraction just outside Phibun township, after the cabinet of Prime Minister Chatichai approved funding for the dam. They then travelled to the proposed dam site where they built a small spirit shrine (*san jao*) for the spirit of the place, forbidding anyone to touch it (Interview, Daeng, Wang Sabaeng Tai Village, 23-9-1997). When EGAT started dam construction and destroyed the spirit shrine one year later, this sparked an immediate response from the anti-dam villagers. At a symbolic level EGAT's destruction of the shrine represented an attack by the Central Thai state on local identity and culture. About 1000 villagers rallied at the Tung Lung Creek Bridge on the Phibun-Khong Jiam Road that formed the main access route to the construction site. After 13 days camped at the bridge, they walked in procession towards the construction site but were blocked by the police. Subsequently 150 representatives of the group travelled to Bangkok to deliver another petition to the Minister responsible for EGAT.

After the military coup of 23 February 1991 the National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) imposed martial law prohibiting rallies or large gatherings throughout the

11 They are a series of monthly merit making rituals and laws, many of which are specific to Northeast Thailand and lowland Laos, that follow the older Lao calendar whereby the first month is December (see also Seri & Hewison, 1990:24-32; Tambiah, 1970:152-160).

whole country. In July 1991, when they lifted these restrictions in most districts, they retained them in Khong Jiam and Phibun Mangsahan districts to suppress protests against the dam (Pfirmann & Kron, 1992). During this time EGAT hurried to accelerate construction in order to take advantage of the restrictions on public protest. Nevertheless, local villagers continued to assemble near the construction site (Interview, Noi, NGO adviser to the Mun River Villagers' Committee, Khong Jiam, 2-8-1997). These repressive laws of the NPKC period were later invoked in arrest warrants for Maliwan and the Chair of the Mun River Villagers' Committee.

Funding and the World Bank

Although the World Bank loan would only amount to 10 percent of the project budget, their involvement as a funding body for the project spurred activists to take the anti-dam campaign to international levels, not just to put pressure on the Bank but also to find ways of exerting international pressure on the Thai government. Environmental NGOs disseminated information to international NGOs such as the World Wide Fund for Nature and the US-based International Rivers Network, who mounted an international campaign against the dam and World Bank funding.

Mun River villagers sent representatives to the World Bank office in Bangkok several times. In March 1991 village representatives submitted a 12,000 signature petition opposing the dam to the Executive Director of the World Bank and Prime Minister Anand's office in Bangkok. In August 1991 the World Bank announced approval for the loan to EGAT, but by September the Bank decided to postpone the transfer of funds until their annual meeting in Bangkok in October that year (Buchita 1997:58). In September USAid recommended that the US government oppose World Bank funding because of adverse social and environmental impacts, and criticised the EIA made by EGAT.

During the annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Bangkok in October 1991, a parallel international "People's Forum" organised by NGOs gave a high profile to anti-dam arguments and maintained a barrage of criticism against the World Bank that was well reported in the print media (for example *Bangkok Post* 8 October 1991:6, Nusara & Veera, 1991). Also during this time about 50 Mun River villagers' representatives travelled to Bangkok to meet with six World Bank Executive Directors and officials at

Chulalongkorn University to lobby for the World Bank to cancel its loan to EGAT. The Siam Environmental Club and the Students' Environmental Organisation from 16 Institutes also sent representatives. PER organised the meeting, and Witoon Permpongsachareon acted as translator:

I moderated that meeting. This was the first time that people affected by the Bank's project had a chance to talk to the decision-making of the Bank. And it was the first time that the Bank's people came face to face with people affected by their project.... The Executive Directors tried to only talk about what the people wanted for compensation. Whatever they said, the people said no dam. We don't want Pak Mun. Don't offer anything. Please stop the project. And then the people invited them to the dam site, the area (Interview in English, Witoon Permpongsachareon, Bangkok, 2-9-1997).

Villagers presented their case, arguing that the dam will destroy the lowland environment along the river on which villagers' depend, as well as fisheries. As one villager said, "In my opinion, there is a close relationship between the Mun River and the people. If the river is destroyed the fish will be gone forever. The Mun River is the life of the people and the community" (Project for Ecological Recovery, 1991). They emphatically opposed resettlement, even with full monetary compensation, as they wished to stay in their home villages. A few days later on 17 October the government arranged a study tour for the World Bank officials to the dam site. They met with about 1000 villagers at Kaeng Sapeu Rapids in Phibun township.

The following month, November 1991, the World Wide Fund for Nature began an international campaign against World Bank funding for the dam. Under international pressure the Bank delayed its decision. In December the Bank finally approved funding of US\$22 million (Murray, 1992b). But this represented only a small proportion of the total cost, and by this stage construction had been under way for six months. EGAT were determined to push the project ahead, and it seems fairly certain that even if the World Bank had pulled out, the project would have gone ahead.

Compensation Demands and Direct action

By early 1993 it became increasingly clear that the dam would not be stopped. National elections in the wake of the popular uprising and violent crackdown by the military in May 1992 brought a coalition led by the Democrat Party to power, with Chuan Leekpai as Prime Minister. Chuan's government fended off attacks on the dam with the claim

that so much had been invested and construction had proceeded so far already that the project must now go ahead.

Stimulated by growing frustration with EGAT and the government, the Mun River Villagers' Committee turned to more direct and confrontational action for the first time to press their demands. That is, prior to this time anti-dam villagers, NGO and student activists had staged protest rallies as shows of strength to gain public attention, but had not actually obstructed access to the dam or physically stopped construction work. This form of popular protest was much more risky and dangerous.

One of the first instances of direct action took place in March 1993, almost 2 years after construction started. The Villagers' Committee established a new aim to gain a guarantee from EGAT and the government that they would take full responsibility for any and all adverse affects once the dam was completed, and that local people would be fully and appropriately compensated, for example if the river's fisheries and consequently local fishers' livelihoods were destroyed. Maliwan explained to me:

Whatever we did, whether we went to petition in Bangkok, or rallied near the construction site, we weren't able to stop them. The border police kept the site clear so that construction could progress. They weren't interested in whether anyone opposed the project. Construction continued unabated... So the villagers began to realise that when they spoke with the government, the government wasn't interested, didn't understand. So they went to occupy the dam site. They closed it, stopped construction work. At that time there were a few thousand construction workers who couldn't work... but not a large number of villagers, maybe 400, who stopped construction work (Interview, Maliwan, Khong Jiam, 19-11-1996).

On 2 March some 400 odd villagers who had been rallying nearby marched on the construction site and occupied the roadway across the dam wall, effectively stopping construction. As Maliwan said, "This was a big threat to the government and EGAT as they were losing money paying the contractors. So they brought in a large number of police to disperse the rally." The police cut this group occupying the dam wall off from the media and from receiving any food or supplies from supporters outside. At about 11 pm on 6 March a group of "pro-dam villagers," backed up by the police, forcibly broke up the rally. Many of the protestors were beaten and badly injured. Local people believe that the "pro-dam" group was organised and paid by a local influential Tambon Head (Fieldnotes, 24-7-1997, Khong Jiam, see also Fahn & Rojanaphruk, 1993).

Amid the uproar in the newspapers about the outbreak of violence in the dispute, a deputation of 100 villagers and activists went to protest at Government House in Bangkok about the use of force and violence against them. After nine days of negotiations EGAT agreed to the villagers' demands to set up a tripartite committee to resolve the dispute and to sign a "memorandum of understanding" undertaking to provide a detailed map of land to be flooded, fairly compensate all villagers adversely affected, and take responsibility for the dam's impact on fisheries.¹² These agreements came to nothing, as the Minister responsible for EGAT refuted their authority as he had not participated in the negotiations (*Bangkok Post* 7 August 1997:3).

Following the villagers' protest and occupation of the dam site in March provincial authorities issued arrest warrants for Maliwan and some of the villagers leaders for trespassing, inciting unrest and libel. On 5 December Maliwan and the chair of the Mun River Villagers' Committee were arrested and jailed for a night. Maliwan told me that many concerned villagers gathered outside the police lockup, and she received a telephone call from the US Ambassador to check on her welfare. The police, many of whom were related to local villagers, made sure that she was very comfortable. The next morning a lawyer from the Union for Civil Liberties (UCL) bailed them out. In 1997 the case was still being tried in the Ubon courts. Indeed, I travelled with Maliwan to the Ubon Provincial Courthouse one day in July 1997 and attended her hearing. UCL had flown a lawyer up from Bangkok to represent her, and Siang the following day. In the event, her hearing lasted barely twenty minutes before the prosecution requested an adjournment for several months. Maliwan believes that the authorities use the court case to harass her and force her to return to Ubon on a regular basis (Fieldnotes, Khong Jiam and Ubon Ratchathani city, 24-7-1997).

Following that first instance of direct action, the anti-dam villagers repeated the strategy several times. For example, in 1994 about 300 village women climbed onto construction

¹² *Bantheuk khwam khaojai reuang neaw thang kaekhai panha thi at koetkheun jak kheuan pak mun 18 minakhon 2536* (Memorandum of understanding on addressing problems which might arise from Pak Mun Dam 18 March 1993), signed by the Governor of EGAT, a representative of the Office of the Prime Minister, one villagers' representative. Document obtained from the Mun River Villagers' Centre, Khong Jiam.

equipment at the dam site during protests over the effects of channel blasting on the residents of nearby Ban Hua Haew. As a result EGAT finally agreed to pay full relocation expenses for 159 households who were threatened by blasting (Interview, Maliwan, Khong Jiam, 19-11-1996; Mae Bun, Hua Haew Village, 3-8-1997).

Identity and Opposition

One of the points at which the concerns of political ecology and social movements theory might be seen to intersect is in the relationship between the environment and identity within the political struggles and conflicts over the environment. Recently, some writers have explored the importance of place and place-making to the social construction of identity (see, for example Gupta & Ferguson, 1997:19; Pile, 1997:27-30). For the Mun River villagers, as for all groups in the Assembly, the articulation and assertion of collective identities has been important to their political struggle. Representation of identity emerged and changed throughout the conflict but the identity that eventually became most powerful was the one which Panya Tongyu introduces at the very start of this thesis - fishers - which combined claims about locality, livelihood, culture and the injustice of their destruction. In Panya's *mo lam* song, these claims are also couched in a folk idiom invoking the cultural identity of the Lao-speaking people of the Northeast. This representation of a collective identity as fishers addressed at least two audiences, as it provided a rallying point for local people to identify with and to join the villagers' organisation and mobilise for compensation. This identity is also explicitly about relationship to place and environment. Villagers claim to be local environmentalists who cared for the river and its resources, and sustainably used the river.

The Fishers' Long March and Marathon Protest

The Mun River villagers long march and protest in 1994-95 represents a turning point in the development of the Mun River Village Committee and its popular support among local villagers. Moreover, at this time the activism, protests and media coverage of the Mun River villagers' actions stimulated the emergence and organisation of other local groups in Ubon with grievances stemming from state projects, most notably villagers affected by the Sirinthorn Dam which had been constructed some 28 years before.

In 1994, with growing concern expressed by local people and environment NGOs about the effects of blasting, dam construction and the dam itself on fisheries in the Mun River, EGAT and the Department of Fisheries proposed an ad hoc solution; they built a fish ladder on the dam and established a Fish Conservation and Breeding Centre upstream from the dam wall. Mun River villagers found it hard to believe that the fish ladder would rehabilitate the river. They joked that “Thai fish can’t jump!” (see Photograph 3). No scientific studies of a fish ladder’s appropriateness to Mun River fish species had ever been made. EGAT carried out a massive public relations exercise with advertisements on TV and in newspapers claiming that these moves had successfully rehabilitated the river: “EGAT has never been unconcerned to help the public in every locality where EGAT works, because dam construction and electric power generation are necessary to answer the country’s needs” (Thithipat, 1995).

After the dam was completed and the gates were closed in June 1994 the Mun River Villagers’ Committee became increasingly concerned that they would be left to suffer the future consequences and carry the costs. In mid-October about 1000 villagers began a protest rally at the Provincial Hall in Ubon Ratchathani, petitioning for compensation for all Mun River fishers whose livelihood was ruined during three year construction period from 1991 to 1994. They demanded compensation for loss of livelihood during the three year construction period amounting to 35,000 baht per year per family. At that time the provincial governor chaired a committee established to address the fisheries compensation issue. After almost two weeks this committee offered 10,000 baht per family for the entire three year period. The villagers rejected this offer.

We rallied at the Provincial Hall but didn’t receive a satisfactory answer. The government offered 10,000 baht per family only, whereas we’d proposed 105,000 baht, which was 35,000 baht per year. But they said that was impossible. On average their offer meant 9 baht a day per family over three years. Villagers pointed out that they previously caught 1000 baht of fish a day. Even if you catch one fish you had made 100 baht already, so the villagers rejected that offer and decided to march out in procession to the dam, about 1000 people at first (Interview, Noi, Khong Jiam, 2-8-1997).

Consequently, in mid-November the protesters marched out from the Provincial Office in Ubon and took to the highway leading to the dam in Khong Jiam, about 100 kilometres away. The procession took fourteen days to reach the dam. As they walked they presented their case at villages and towns along the way, and slept in village

temples at night. Their numbers grew as they walked, so that by the time they arrived at the dam there were between 1,500 to 2,000 people in their ranks, and 2,230 families listed in their compensation claim. Kan, from Latwari Village and member of the Mun River Villagers' Committee told me the story during the Assembly's protest in Bangkok:

When we reached the dam we met a barbed wire barrier. We decided that EGAT must remove the barbed wire, or we would remove it ourselves, for the people have a free right to travel where we wish. They can't just block the road. So we removed it while the police stood and watched, they could do nothing. We marched onto the dam wall. EGAT brought in ten wheeled trucks and blocked the road on the ridge of the dam, so we stopped right there. 'Right here will be where we rally!' So we rallied there for another 4 months from 27 November until 23 March [1995]. During that time we all moved our families in to live there. We had our own village, food stalls... we had a school, we had everything there... a school for kids, a meeting room. We made everything together. And there were many rounds of negotiations. In the bargaining the 105,000 baht came down to 90,000 baht, they offered to pay 30,000 baht in cash and 60,000 into revolving funds that the Provincial Governor would oversee and Village Heads would administer. We wouldn't accept that, for if the money went to Village Heads you never knew who it would end up with, probably only with Village Head's relatives. We proposed a cooperative. At least then the members could look after the money. So the government accepted as they already sponsor cooperatives. It's their policy, and has the King's approval too (Interview, Kan, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

As Kan says, the protest was very well organised. Indeed they had to be to sustain themselves for four months. Volunteer guards looked after order and security. Women volunteers tended to health and hygiene. The villagers selected a handful of representatives for their negotiating team. This experience of creating a well-organised community with a sense of solidarity and common purpose that could maintain morale and protest for a long period of time, was an important antecedent to the two mass rallies that the Assembly of the Poor was to stage in Bangkok.

Events during the marathon rally marked the growing importance of the alliance and support of other grassroots organisations to the Pak Mun campaign. The growth of the local anti-Pak Mun movement over the previous few years and its attendant publicity stimulated villagers displaced by the Sirinthorn Dam in 1971 to join their campaign for just compensation with the Mun River villagers. A few days after the Mun River villagers occupied the dam site, about 300 Sirinthorn Dam villagers decided to join the

rally and submit a petition to EGAT. They marched together towards the Pak Mun Dam but police stopped them on a bridge a few kilometres from the rally. That evening (3 December) police moved on them from both ends of the bridge, giving them no way to retreat or disperse. More than 50 people were injured and 14 were arrested (Interviews with Sirinthorn Dam villagers' leaders, *Pho Somli* and *Pho Prida*, Nikhom Village, Sirinthorn District, Ubon, 18-7-1997, see also *Bangkok Post*, Reuters Database, 18 December 1994).

If the authorities and police feared the growth of an organised Sirinthorn Dam villagers' movement throwing its weight in with the Pak Mun movement, this is exactly what happened. A week after the violent dispersal of their group, the Union for Civil Liberties in Ubon conducted an investigation of the Sirinthorn villagers' grievances and the events of 3 December.¹³ The media publicity this stimulated and widespread condemnation of the use of violence by the police also forced the Interior Ministry to conduct an investigation into the incident.

The police crackdown only spurred on the villagers' leaders. They began visiting the dozens of villages where people displaced by the dam over twenty years previously had ended up, building their own network to pursue just compensation. By 1996 over 2500 families had joined and the Sirinthorn Dam group had become the largest of a cluster of villagers' organisations in the province who allied with the Mun River Villagers' Committee and were coordinated from the Mun River Villagers' Centre and the NGO activists based there.

This rally also revealed the growing capacity to mobilise support and resources through NGO and villagers' networks. The Mun River Villagers' Committee was a member of the NGO-CORD network and the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast (ASFN), and both organisations sent representatives, food and other supplies, as did a slum dwellers' network in Bangkok. Academics and grassroots organisations from around the country submitted letters to the Prime Minister and the government calling

13 A document from the UCL office in Ubon, *Kan lamoet sit chao-ban kheuan sirinthorn* (Violation of Sirinthorn Dam villagers' rights), 13 December 1994, presents a number of verbal testimonies and accounts of the events by Sirinthorn villagers.

on them to respond fairly to the Mun River villagers grievances and demands (*Bangkok Post* 24 November 1994). Chulalongkorn University hosted a seminar in which villagers, EGAT representatives and academics exchanged their views about the dam's impacts on fishing (*Bangkok Post* 2 December 1994).

This protest was one of their most successful ever. On 23 March 1995 the villagers packed up their rally and returned home to their villages in triumph. As Kan relates in the quote above, after five months this demonstration succeeded in forcing EGAT and the government to accede to villagers demands for compensation for loss of Mun River fisheries during the three-year dam construction period. In March EGAT agreed to pay 30,000 baht per family for each of the three years to each of 2,211 families. Of the total of 90,000 baht compensation per family, 30,000 would be paid in cash and 60,000 would be paid into an agricultural cooperative to be established for that purpose and administered by the villagers themselves.

The rally's success brought a reinvigorated sense of confidence in their capacity to work together within the villagers' organisation to influence the state and gain material benefits for members. They had forced EGAT and the government to accept responsibility for the dam's destruction of local people's fishing livelihoods during the construction period. This was unprecedented in the history of dam compensation in Thailand. As Kan explained, "That rally is very famous, and has stimulated many more rallies, in many places using the same approach. That is, struggle using nonviolence (*ahingsa*), not physically attacking anyone, peaceful methods free of weapons, struggle by means of our bare hands, our feet" (Interview, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

Mun River Villagers' Centre

When payment of the 30,000 baht cash component began in 1995 the steering committee of the Mun River Villagers' Committee asked each family to donate a small proportion to help build a new headquarters on the land at Ban Pha Pratu Thong. Villagers also contributed their labour and built the first stage of the new Mun River Villagers Centre next to the bamboo shacks that had housed the NGO activists (see Photographs 4, 5 & 6). The building is still unfinished, awaiting another injection of funds and labour, but the roof is on and two offices have been walled in to house the day to day work of the Centre, and mezzanine floors above the offices provide sleeping

quarters for the handful of NGO staff that live on the premises.

The Mun River Villagers' Centre is the headquarters of both the villagers' organisation and the NGO activists. In 1996 it also became the temporary headquarters of the new Pak Mun Villagers Agricultural Cooperative. The new cooperative, flush with funds from the government compensation package, is directed by a committee elected from among its member villagers and has challenged them to develop new organisational capacities and activities beyond the protest campaign focused on the dam. The cooperative is enabled under Thai law to invest in activities to develop and support new forms of livelihood and income generation for its members, and provide for their welfare. In 1997 it started providing discount fertiliser to members, purchased land and contracted a local builder to build its own office and storage facility.

Since 1995 the Mun River Villagers' Centre has become a coordinating centre, not just for the Pak Mun dam campaign, but for a cluster of local villagers' groups in Ubon. As the local Pak Mun opposition movement grew and became better organised and highly publicised in the mass media, it attracted the attention of other local communities embroiled in conflicts over development and land rights. Many contacted Mun River villagers' leaders and NGO activists seeking advice and allies for their own local campaigns. As I mentioned above, one of the first groups to join with the Mun River villagers campaigns and protests was a group of villagers displaced by construction of the Sirinthorn Dam. In 1994 when they first acted to campaign for fair compensation from the state only a few hundred families had joined their organisation. By 1997 almost 2,500 families from about seventy villages in three districts had joined the Sirinthorn Dam villagers' organisation.

Other groups include villagers displaced by the Chong Mek border checkpoint redevelopment, villagers threatened with eviction from their homes and land within recently declared national parks such as Tana Rapids on the Mun River and Pha Taem National Park on the banks of the Mekong, and villagers opposing the proposed Dorm Yai River irrigation dam. Representatives of all these groups meet on a routine basis at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, ensuring interaction between them. They attend each other's activities and support each other's campaigns. When they can, some of these other local groups contribute resources to the centre. In 1997, when the Chong Mek

Group finally received financial compensation from the government that was won during the Assembly of the Poor rally in Bangkok, they each donated a proportion of their payment to purchase a second-hand pickup truck for the Centre.

Conclusion

The efforts of Mun River villagers to build an organised and sustained opposition to the dam illustrate the problems of how to get organised in the first place. The dam divided local communities, many villagers believing officials' claims that the dam would bring jobs and modernity to the area, others fearing the coercive power of the authorities if they dissented. Those who did join opposition rallies were accused of being outsiders not representing local people's interests, of being manipulated by communists, urban environmentalists or some "influential" figure. This was a struggle over the assertion and representation of agency, of who has the right to speak and act. Organised opposition first emerged in twenty or so villages nearest to the proposed dam construction site, and coalesced around people who had the experience or confidence to claim a right to speak and oppose the dam. Early on, many of these villagers used their kinship and friendship networks to promote debate and rally people against the dam. Student activists, NGO activists and lawyers from the Union for Civil Liberties encouraged villagers to oppose the dam and helped them find allies and build networks of support which linked them with national and international environmental organisations.

Villagers used cultural resources in sophisticated and complex ways to express their opposition, rally support and articulate a collective identity. The spirit shrine constructed at the dam site, the use of merit-making festivals to rally people, and the popular expression of their struggle through *mo lam* songs performed at rallies and protests, are all examples presented here. Through such means villagers expressed an identity that closely linked their way of life and livelihood with the river. This identity as fishers whose culture and livelihood expressed a dependence on the environment and a local knowledge of its ecology has served as a rallying point for a growing number of villagers joining the organisation since construction and underscores their demands for compensation.

The villagers' organisation's numbers and political strategies continued to develop during and after dam construction. As one villagers' leader said to me after we attended an Assembly of the Poor meeting, "I think it may be a good thing sometimes to encounter problems, it brings people together". Of particular importance for the emergence of the Assembly of the Poor was the galvanising of other nearby villagers' groups to mount their own campaigns and protests, and to form *alliances* with the Mun River villagers. This growing alliance of villagers' organisations, engaged in conflicts over a range of different issues from dams to national parks, has become one important centre of rural activism in the Assembly. The network has been coordinated by NGO workers based at the Mun River Villagers' Centre and it is to these activists, and their central roles in the Assembly of the Poor that I turn in the next chapter.



Photograph 3. The Pak Mun Dam wall and fish ladder that was added on to it in 1995. Local people declare “Thai fish can’t jump!”



Photograph 4. The Mun River Villagers' Centre in 1996. NGO activists first built the bamboo huts in the foreground and lived there without power or running water. When the villagers won some financial compensation from the government in 1995, they contributed towards the new building which can be seen in the background. It remains unfinished (see next photograph).



Photograph 5. The entrance to the Mun River Villagers' Centre. Only two back rooms have been walled in to create offices for the NGO workers, with a mezzanine floor above each for sleeping quarters.



Photograph 6. A meeting of villagers' representatives at the Centre. Somchai, the NGO activist (standing), and Siang (seated, with hat), jointly chair the meeting.

5 'Candles in the Darkness' or 'Third Hand'? NGO Activists In The Movement

The NGOs are like candles (*thian*) in the darkness. If the light is not bright, we can't progress (*mai pai*). NGOs are like one source of light (*saeng sawang*) for us (Jan, Mun River villager, during the Assembly of the Poor protest in Bangkok, 3-2-1997).

We know who the third hand (*meu thi-sam*) behind the Assembly of the Poor protest is. It's the NGOs (Chingchai Mongkhontham, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister, during a television interview on Channel 9, 15-2-1997).

I paid my first visit to the Mun River Villagers' Centre in November 1996 to meet Maliwan, manager of the Mun River Basin Conservation Project, an NGO established to support the local villagers' campaign against the Pak Mun Dam. Maliwan had become well known for her anti-dam activism and I had already read several articles about her in Thai newspapers. My wife and I arrived after dark and found her and another four young NGO staff watching television inside the Centre. Maliwan led us to a crumbling bamboo hut just outside, where we sat cross-legged on the rough floor and talked. She seemed in a relaxed, affable mood, but her eyes, accentuated by her thick, broad-rimmed glasses, followed me intently as I explained my research. During our interview she talked for an hour or so about how she joined the NGO movement and came to get involved in the Mun River villagers' fight against the dam. The Mun River villagers' story has already been outlined in the previous chapter. In this chapter I tell on a different, parallel story, focusing on NGO activists like Maliwan, how and why they got involved in the NGO movement, their roles in the Assembly of the Poor and their relationships with villagers.

NGOs and Activism

In Chapter 2 I presented a brief historical account of the recent history and development of NGOs in Thailand in order to explain their importance in understanding the emergence of the Assembly of the Poor. I argued that a predominantly middle-class democratic movement has largely channelled its energy and activities through NGOs since the early 1980s. In this chapter, I focus more on the activists themselves in order

to explore and analyse how and why such a small group of people can play such central roles within the Assembly.

There has been a huge amount written about NGOs, their contribution to alternative strategies of development and the expansion of civil society in the Third World during recent decades.¹⁴ Similarly, Thai academics and journalists have written a large amount about NGO activities in their country.¹⁵ Furthermore, Thai NGOs produce a large amount of literature and this is an important part of their campaigns and development work. And yet there is very little written about the actual people who work within these NGOs, apart from observing that they tend to be staffed by educated, middle class professionals from urban backgrounds. NGOs are held to be important political agents, but what of the actual people, the individual activists who actually perform the work of NGOs? This chapter explores their motivations and the meanings that their work carries for them. It describes how the day to day work of social activists is socially constructed, how they interact with other social groups, particularly the villagers who make up the rank and file members of the Assembly of the Poor.

NGO activists working with villagers' organisations in the Assembly of the Poor say that power and authority to determine activities and goals lies entirely with the villagers through processes of democratic decision-making. NGOs, in this view, offer support, not leadership. A number of studies, however, have raised questions about the relationship between NGOs and their grassroots constituency. Recent work by Rigg (1991; 1994) and Tjelland (1995) in Thailand argues that real power in such relationships lies with the urban, educated NGO activists.

Rigg's and Tjelland's critiques are based on an analysis of Thai society as fundamentally structured around patron-client relations. "In Thailand, patron-client links are more pervasive and have greater power in explaining why certain villages or individuals become involved (and succeed) in certain activities" (Rigg, 1991:204). From this perspective, the relationship between NGO activists and villagers "is not an

14 Examples include (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Clark, 1991; Clarke, 1998; Julie Fisher, 1993; 1998; Korten, 1990; Macdonald, 1997; Silliman & Noble, 1998).

15 Some useful examples are (Amara & Nitaya, 1994; Naruemon, 1997; Pasuk, 1999; Prudhisan &

interaction of equals” (Rigg, 1991:204). Rigg argues that “most NGO activists accept that villagers are by nature passive” and “there is a tendency for [NGO] facilitators to become leaders, to take decisions without consulting the people, and to create a hierarchy of relationships” (1994:22).

Rigg writes in general about the limitations, as he sees them, of NGO approaches to alternative, grassroots development in Thailand. Tjelland (1995), on the other hand, gives an ethnographic account of a particular villagers’ organisation, the *samatcha chao-na chao-rai isan* (Northeastern Farmers’ Assembly for Protection of Land Rights) which later joined the Assembly of the Poor (see Chapter 2). He argues that NGO activists occupy positions as political “brokers” to the outside socio-political system. Villagers’ mobilisation within the organisation is dependent on the activities of the NGO activists, whom villagers seek out as patrons to help them deal with local problems. In other words, villagers acquire power to oppose incursions and threats from the state not through popular organisation but through aligning themselves under higher level patrons. The unavoidable conclusion is that power rests with the NGOs.

This is a very different characterisation of the villagers’ organisation–NGO relationship than that mentioned above as promoted by NGOs. It is important to consider the issue here, because it has become a common way in which politicians, government officials and others in Thailand attack the legitimacy of grassroots organisations’ campaigns and popular protests. These critics say that the middle class NGO activists are the “third hand” behind organised villagers protests, implying that villagers are largely followers and NGOs are the real instigators and leaders who set the movement’s agenda and goals. In this way they seek to discredit the collective agency of poor, rural villagers, trying to defuse the power of mass protest by portraying them as a “mob” being manipulated by NGOs for their own purposes.

NGO Activists: Who Are They and Why Do They Get Involved?

There are three types of people in Assembly of the Poor: one, villagers; two, outstanding villagers’ leaders. And there is one more group that people call NGOs, only about 20 people in all. These advisers are NGO

Maneerat, 1997; Quinn, 1997; Suthy, 1995; Thai Development Support Committee, 1997)

activists ... many are middle aged, university graduates, and with long experience as activists, some as student activists, some from being leaders in earlier struggles (Interview, Sawat, Senior NGO activist and adviser to Assembly, Bangkok, 29-10-1997).

NGOs have become the institutions through which members of the educated middle class have been drawn into advocacy and development work with the rural and urban poor. As Sawat suggests, the NGO staff who work closely with the Assembly are social activists, as they all see their work as contributing to social change and constructing a fairer, more just society. They can almost all be described as 'middle class' as they are highly educated, mostly with a degree or tertiary diploma, are employed by NGOs as professional development workers and use a range of non-manual skills requiring high-level literacy, communication and management abilities. Many come from urban, middle class families but a large proportion were born into poor, rural village families and managed to gain entry to universities or colleges. Most of these (from village backgrounds) studied teaching but after graduating chose not to work as teachers.

For example, in 1997 nine NGO workers (four women and five men) were employed on a regular basis at the Mun River Villagers Centre in either the Mun River Conservation Project (NGO) or the Pak Mun Agricultural Cooperative.¹⁶ Four people worked for the NGO and five for the Cooperative. Of those nine NGO staff, only four came from an urban background: two from Bangkok (including Maliwan) and two from Ubon Ratchathani. Of the five staff from rural, village backgrounds, four were born locally either in Khong Jiam or Phibun districts, while one (Noi) came from Suphanburi in Central Thailand. Six out of the nine NGO staff had either undergraduate degrees or technical college diplomas, while one was still studying at Ramkhamhaeng Open University. The remaining two young men had completed six years of primary and three years of secondary schooling (*mo 3*).

For most NGO activists their tertiary student years provided the crucial experiences and motivation which drew them into the NGO movement. The older generation

¹⁶ Agricultural Cooperatives are not usually considered to be NGOs but there are good reasons for seeing this cooperative as a development NGO. It was established as a direct result of the Mun River Villagers' Organization's campaigns against the dam. Most of its administrative staff come from an NGO activist background, and some of them came directly from the Mun River Conservation Project. The Cooperative

participated in the flourishing student movement of the mid-1970s which met with violent repression in 1976 and forced many of them to flee into the forests to join the communist insurgency. As I mentioned in Chapter 2 this “October generation” of activists provided the driving force for the NGO movement during the time of its rapid expansion in the 1980s. This group plays a key role in the Assembly of the Poor.

The 6 October Generation

Many of the older generation of NGO activists (early 40s and older) in the Assembly of the Poor came of age in the students’ movement in the mid-1970s. This provided a series of defining experiences. The student-led mass protests toppled the military dictatorship on 14 October 1973 and brought a short-lived democratic period until 1976, during which progressive and left-wing elements flourished. When right-wing and military forces violently repressed the student movement on 6 October 1976, many activist leaders and students chose to escape into regional forests to join the communist insurgency.

Maliwan, the manager of the Mun River Conservation Project is one example of an activist from this generation who became prominent in the Pak Mun Dam conflict and, later, the Assembly of the Poor. The second oldest of seven children, Maliwan was born in 1955 in Bangkok to a Chinese family who were part-owners of a small manufacturing business. When she finished high school Maliwan entered Thammasat University in 1974 to study political science. She was quickly caught up in the lively student movement for political reform and democratisation and joined the Student Federation of Thailand. Student activists worked with disadvantaged factory labourers in the city, rural villagers facing debt and landlessness, and participated in democracy education campaigns. As a student activist Maliwan worked with female textile workers in their campaign for fair wages.

The right-wing crackdown on students in October 1976 provided another turning point. Maliwan saw several of her friends die.

The incident had a major impact on my life... I lost a lot of friends in that massacre. They were very courageous and dared to fight the authorities.

works closely with this NGO and their activities are closely inter-linked.

I was not (Interview, Maliwan, Khong Jiam, 19-11-1996).

Many student activists feared for their own safety but also wanted to keep fighting for the democratic reforms that they had seen starting to become reality during the 1973-76 period. After the brutal repression Maliwan, along with thousands of other students and left-wing activists, joined the CPT insurgency in the forests. Pen, a close female friend of Maliwan and fellow student at Thammasat University, talked about the experience:

We all agreed that working in the city under these circumstances was dangerous. We couldn't go anywhere, or if we wanted to return to our studies, would we be able to? My friends decided to go together into the countryside to keep struggling. For most of us it was like that. At that time, the CPT already had a process of coordination between the city and countryside. So they tried to draw people in. They tried to invite people to join to avoid arrest or whatever... At that time I didn't know much about the communist party. I hadn't learned much about it, just that we saw that Thailand must change, and saw that the people's movement was important, I mean joining together to call for justice... but I really learned about them [the CPT] once I went into the forest...

I spent about 5 years in the forest. They had us go and live with villagers. Mostly we didn't go anywhere, but worked together with the villagers, living together as a village community and working with them, growing rice, other crops, teaching. Sometimes we'd go to talk with other groups of villagers - we'd go and help them in their work and explain about the CPT, what they were fighting for. But an internal problem in the CPT was that our group [students] had no opportunity to collectively influence their direction and strategies. They said they'd established that already, it was finalised already, and so we had to work this way. But we [students] had aligned ourselves with social justice. Later I heard from a friend who worked with the CPT in the city that there was conflict over strategies...

Bruce: Were you ever frightened?

Yes, it was frightening. Our area where we lived was bombed. But living in the forest - I liked to learn about the indigenous people, hill tribe people - I feel that part was good, what I learned from them: culture, festivals, skills. They have particular skills and a great deal of knowledge.

I met my husband in the forest and we married in the forest. But he had to take care of himself, he caught malaria in the forest. A lot of people caught malaria (Interview, Pen, Bangkok, 28-10-1997).

Like Pen, Maliwan spent almost five years with the CPT in the forests. When the government offered a general moratorium in 1980 she returned to Bangkok and resumed her studies at Thammasat University. After graduating in 1984, she took a variety of

jobs to try to help her family, whose business had been bankrupt. She worked as vendor and tour guide, among other things.

In 1990 Maliwan went to work for the Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), a Bangkok-based, environmental NGO. Two principle PER activists had been fellow students at Thammasat University, and it was this connection that drew Maliwan into the NGO movement. She, in turn, encouraged Pen to take up a position as PER's office manager at the same time. (Pen has been with PER ever since, and quickly shifted from administrative activities to campaign work on large dams and, most recently, the nuclear power industry. She acted as a technical adviser to the Dams Network in the Assembly of the Poor.) Maliwan worked with two local communities threatened by large dams, Kaeng Seua Ten in Northern Thailand and the Mun River in the Northeast. In 1992 a conflict arose between Maliwan and others in PER which threw into relief differences over NGO strategies and grassroots activism. Pen explained the conflict to me in these terms:

It was a big issue that made Maliwan leave PER. PER determined its role to be a support organisation (*ongkon sanap-sasun*)... The villagers were joining together in the local area, and Maliwan announced that she came from PER and supported the villagers, so the media tried to hold her up as the person leading the villagers. This caused a difference of opinion – PER said that they wanted her to support the villagers but not take a high profile. This word 'support' (*sanap-sasun*) implied a limited, supporting role... But Maliwan felt that to help the villagers fight you have to get involved, get involved in helping them form their own organisation, get involved and be a part of the villagers' organisation. According to her vision she wasn't worried about this issue. She felt that she didn't have to separate her role. A person with education, knowledge and ideas should be able to join with the villagers in their fight. But the view of PER was that the NGO and villagers' organisation were separate, different things and in the struggle you had to make your role and position clear. When dealing with the media you should have a villagers' leader rise and speak, or when contacting provincial authorities, or submitting petitions, not Maliwan. PER raised concrete issues like this. This was how the conflict emerged in 1992 (Interview, Bangkok, 28-10-1997).

As a result of this conflict Maliwan left PER and set up the Mun River Conservation Project as a locally-based NGO to support the villagers' organisation. She retained strong links with PER, and with the help of NGO-CORD (the national NGO coordinating body) gained funding for the NGO from foreign donors. It is important to note that two other siblings of Maliwan have also become social activists. A younger

sister now works with the Human Settlement Foundation working with slum communities in Bangkok, while her brother is an activist journalist.

Of the twenty or so NGO activists and activist academics who work most closely with the Assembly of the Poor there are a handful, about six or seven, who, like Maliwan, participated in the flourishing student movement of the mid-70s and joined the CPT insurgency in the forests. Sawang, secretary of the Human Settlement Foundation, an urban-based NGO which works with slum communities in Bangkok, is another example. Sawang was born in the eastern province of Chonburi in 1952, the second of eight children in a poor village family. His parents made their living from cultivating cassava. His older brother had only completed primary schooling, but with the help of relatives Sawang completed secondary school and gained entry to Srinakarinwirot University in Bang Saen, Chonburi, where he studied physics and education. In 1973, then in his third year of university, Sawang joined the student-led rallies in Bangkok that led to the fall of the Thanom-Praphat dictatorship on 14 October. The following year he was nominated and elected to Student President in his campus. After he graduated in 1975 took a job teaching at a progressive technical college.

After 6 October 1976 I couldn't stay in the city. The government issued an arrest warrant for me. I could have been killed, the repression was very violent. So I retreated to the forest for a period... The CPT held as its highest ideology (*udomkan*) that this society was failing, the people were exploited and their rights violated, and that there was only one way to fix society and that was to seize power and organise a new society. But the ideology of those of us who went into the forest after October wasn't the same, according to my experience. We held to liberal democracy not socialism. Only a very small number held the same ideology as the CPT (Interview, Sawang, Bangkok, 29-10-1997).

When the government offered a general amnesty to insurgents in 1980 Sawang left the insurgency and found a job with a small NGO project supporting a small-scale coffee growers' association in Southern Thailand.

In 1987 my mother became ill and I decided to return to work in the city to be closer to her. I came to work with the Duang Prateep Foundation [that undertakes development and social welfare work in Klong Teuy slum in Bangkok]. I kept in touch with my friends already working for the Foundation and they helped me get the job (Interview, Sawang, Bangkok, 29-10-1997).

In 1989 Sawang married a fellow Duang Prateep worker who is still with the Foundation. Later that year he left to work for the Human Settlement Foundation, where

has stayed ever since.

There are dozens of others from this generation, like Pen and others at PER mentioned above, who support the Assembly or are drawn into strategic activities on occasion. Their shared experiences have contributed to a sense of membership of a network or community who carry on an activist tradition with its roots in the rapid social changes of the 1970s. Sawang expressed this clearly:

I can say that I've never worked in the state bureaucracy or with the privileged class. I've always stayed in social activist circles, always sided with the poor.... Some of this generation still hold the ideology that you have to empower the poor to address their problems. Some of us are still close, such as those of us who are advisers to the Assembly of the Poor. We are representatives of the October generation who identify with the problems of the poor (Interview, Bangkok, 29-10-1997).

Of course, not all of the October generation who joined in the student movement in the 1970s or spent time in the forest with the CPT later joined the NGO movement. A great many, probably the majority, returned to professional, business or civil service careers. Some took up, or resumed, academic careers. Many of the academics who work closely with the Assembly of the Poor, such as Somkiat Pongphaiboon, fall into this category. Some, for example Adisorn Plianket, a New Aspiration Party MP and cabinet minister in the Chavalit government, used successful business careers to launch themselves into politics. Many NGO activists believe that the shared experiences of the October generation help them find sympathetic allies and build networks among other influential professionals and government officials. As Sawang told me:

When Thailand was governed by a military dictatorship we rose and struggled. A lot of people were killed. We said that if we are to have our nation develop we must have democratic government. So that bound us together in the past. I believe that those politicians who were fighters in the past have a much deeper understanding of social problems than politicians in general. Really in the present [New Aspiration Party] government there are three or four MPs who came of age as activists in that period. I knew them all then. We worked together in campaigns. We made joint announcements that we would fight for the future of our country, for Thai society, for our poor brothers and sisters (Interview, Bangkok, 29-10-1997).

In this section I have focused on the experiences of the October generation of NGO activists to explore their motivations and bring out some of the connections and continuities with the influential student movement of the 1970s. In Chapter 2 I discuss

this in terms of the history and development of NGOs at an organisational level, whereas in this chapter I try to explore it in a more personal, subjective level in order to understand the experiences and motives of activists. As the manager of the Thai Volunteer Service put it:

The 14 October movement, 6 October movement and lastly NGOs are the same group of people who developed out of volunteer student camp groups, developed out of opposition to dictatorship, developed out of the group who went into the forests, but they have a range of beliefs and approaches (Interview, Det Phumkhacha, 27-10-1997).

If their experience of the 1970s student movement in organisations such as the Student Federation of Thailand provided the turning point and recruiting ground for the NGO movement which expanded rapidly from the early 1980s, then a younger generation has also been drawn into the movement through revitalised student organisations and the emergence of a growing environmental consciousness and activism among the student movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

The “Young Turks”

For most of the younger generation of NGO activists in the Assembly of the Poor their experience of student volunteer development camps, environmental conservation clubs and other student organisations designed to promote development activities, environmental or social activism, drew them into the NGO movement. The Thai Volunteer Service (TVS) began to play a key role as it provided a centralised recruiting agency for NGOs throughout the country. Graduates recruited into the TVS program are assigned as “volunteers” to NGOs needing staff. Although called “volunteers” these NGO recruits are actually paid a basic wage by TVS, thus providing financial and human resources for small NGO projects that often have very limited resources. PER also follows this strategy, and employs “volunteers” to work in small, local, environment-oriented NGO projects throughout regional Thailand.

Noi represents a younger generation of socially-mobile NGO activists who, although from poor, village backgrounds have been able to take advantage of expanding opportunities for tertiary education, especially in teacher education. He was 27 years old when I interviewed him in 1997:

I was born in a village in Suphanburi and went to primary school there. My father and mother grew rice and cash crops. I went to high school in

Nakhon Pathom. After finishing high school I went to study education at Kasetsat University, Bangkok campus [in Bangkok]. While I was a student I joined the University Rural Development Club. They held many types of development activities both within the university and during camps in rural communities... At first it didn't mean much to me because I was from a rural family already. But with my opportunity to study in Bangkok, I saw changes in the city which made me look back to the countryside and see problems, see disadvantages, see that rural people still have few choices in our society. So I felt that if I had this opportunity to study I should make the most of it, and I should take the knowledge and experience back to help rural society. This seemed better than city life where everyone selfishly works only for themselves or their family (Interview, Khong Jiam, 2-8-1997).

Noi joined the Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation society in his university which is part of a national organisation across 16 educational institutes (*Khanakammakan anurak saphayakon thammachat lae saphapwaetlom 16 sathaban*). With this society Noi visited the Mun River in 1991 to assist the villagers' campaign against the Pak Mun Dam. There he met Maliwan for the first time. After he graduated from Kasetsat University in 1992 Noi went to Maliwan and told her he wanted to get involved. Initially he was employed as a volunteer fieldworker by PER. "At that time I was field supervisor, responsible for coordinating and communicating with the villagers' representatives". When Maliwan resigned from PER and set up the Mun River Conservation Project, Noi became part of the new NGO team.

Noi's experience is fairly typical of the young NGO staff at the Mun River Villagers' Centre who have tertiary education. The same can be said for young activists based in regional centres and also Bangkok. For example, Phaibun, the Secretary for the Isan Farmers' Assembly, came from Trang Province in Southern Thailand and studied law at Ramkhamhaeng University in the early 1980s:

I became an activist at university. I joined the Rural Development Club and went on camps to villages in the North. After I graduated in 1984 I approached the Thai Volunteer Service and they sent me to work for a project promoting farmers' groups in Surin [in the Northeast] (Interview, Khon Kaen, 20-8-1997).

The two young coordinators of Friends of the People (FOP), who now run the Assembly of the Poor's secretarial office in Bangkok, both became committed social activists during their student years. Wiset was 31 years old when I interviewed him in 1997. He comes from a family with a small business in Udon Thani in Northeast Thailand. He

entered Kasetsart University, Bangkok, in the mid-1980s to study teaching but left after two years to study law at Ramkhamhaeng open university. At Ramkhamhaeng he joined the Student Social Work Club which undertook development camps and other social development activities. Through the students' club and TVS Wiset was introduced to the Youth Training Program (YT), a small Bangkok-based NGO, where he worked as a student volunteer and was soon employed as the program administrator. He continued his legal studies but they took second place to his social activism (Interview, Wiset, Bangkok, 2-9-1997).

Wiset's colleague in FOP, Jaroen, 27 years old in 1997, came from a village background in Southern Thailand. Jaroen studied Mass Communications at Ramkhamhaeng University and in his second year he joined a group of students involved in practising public speaking and volunteer development camps. With them he joined in protest rallies organised by the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast (ASFN) in 1994 and thus began a growing involvement in student activism. He was elected president of the Students' Federation of Thailand and still works closely with student activists from this organisation. After completing his degree Jaroen came to work for FOP (Interview, Jaroen, Bangkok, 1-9-1997).

As the case studies and examples presented so far would indicate, most NGO activists are highly educated, with an undergraduate degree or college diploma. Their tertiary student years provide them with much of the knowledge and skills needed for their professional NGO work, but also contact and experience with student organisations and networks that motivates them to work for NGOs. Thus, as I mentioned above, to this extent NGOs might be characterized as "middle class", even though they come from a variety of social backgrounds. But there is also a growing number of activists being drawn from local communities and villagers' organisations into voluntary and paid positions within NGOs, especially in the locally-based, grassroots-support NGOs.

Wari, Porn and Mu, three young men who work at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, are examples of young activists who have been recruited into NGOs via a different route. All were aged in their early 20s when I met them in 1997. All had completed six years of primary schooling and two or three years of secondary school. They were all born and raised in local villages and had taken on very active roles in the Mun River

Villagers' Committee and its campaign against the Pak Mun dam. They worked closely with Maliwan, Noi and others in the Mun River Conservation Project. As they developed friendships and closer relationships with the paid NGO activists, they took on voluntary, unpaid positions as field-workers for the NGO and developed skills as community organisers. Eventually Porn and Wari were offered paid positions in the NGO and Cooperative respectively. Mu still works as an unpaid volunteer, and is the unofficial driver of the new NGO pickup truck.

In this section I have discussed the backgrounds and motivations of activists who joined the NGO movement and now hold important roles within the Assembly of the Poor. In the next section I go on to discuss their roles and position within the Assembly.

Grassroots Support Organisations and Activism at the Local Level

The Mun River Villagers' Centre serves as headquarters for both the Mun River Villagers' Committee for Rehabilitation of Life and Community, and the NGO workers who support them. But despite the name, the centre is the activists' domain. They manage it and work there on a day to day basis. In 1997, of the two completed offices, one accommodated the staff of the Mun River Basin Conservation Project, while the administrators of the Pak Mun Villagers Agricultural Cooperative occupied the other. Some of them lived there, as I mentioned, in quarters above the offices. The Mun River Villagers Centre, therefore, was the main local site where NGO activists and villagers met and interacted (there are other places, as I will illustrate below).

Maliwan and the other NGO staff conceive of the Mun River Basin Conservation Project as a locally-based "villagers' support organisation" employing a small number of well-educated and skilled people working to support and assist the villagers' organisation and its campaign against the Pak Mun Dam. The activists maintain a distinction between the NGO and the villagers' organisation that they support. They claim that authority, decision-making and the right to speak on villagers' behalf rests with the villagers' organisation, not the NGO. As we have already seen, however, at times this distinction seems to break down in practice.

Noi explained the role of the Mun River Basin Conservation Project in the following terms:

We play a part in helping the villagers get organised. We are the ones who support them by organising a forum (*wethi*) in which to meet. In organising a forum like this we don't give orders or lead them in any way. Villagers do that themselves, they make their own decisions. For instance, when I was field supervisor I linked up with village organisers (*kaen nam*). I went out to the villages and worked with community volunteers, such as youths and local leaders. I organised meetings and seminars. From this sort of coordination we would begin to see the form of an organisation emerge.

Our NGO only has a few individuals, so we depend on the villagers' leaders (*phu nam*) to make sacrifices and coordinate work. The NGO's role is probably to help communicate and coordinate with the state. If it happens that the villagers intend to submit a petition, we will contact the authority, we will request an appointment with the governor to have him accept the petition (Interview, Noi, Mun River Villagers' Centre, Khong Jiam, 2-8-1997).

The *kaen nam* that Noi speaks of link the members of their own village with the villagers' organisation as a whole and work closely with the NGO activists. The phrase *kaen nam* connotes figuratively the position of these village-level organisers. *Nam* means to lead, guide or bring. *Kaen* means axis or axle. Therefore, a useful way to describe them is as the axis, or turning point of the organisation's (and the Assembly's) network in each village. The *kaen nam* is responsible for communicating with, organising and mobilising the members in his or her village. This is a two-way process, and *kaen nam* are often charged with ascertaining their fellow villagers' opinions on an issue before final decisions can be made. (I describe their roles during protest in Chapter 6, and in local level democratic processes in Chapter 7).

Activists emphasise the limitations of their very small numbers compared to the geographic spread and numbers of villagers they work with. Maliwan told me that because of this NGO activists have to use the skills they do have very strategically and that the bulk of the work must be performed by the villagers:

Our NGO has a very small number of people and there are some volunteers and new graduates, just what you can see here today. But the area we work in is very large, particularly in the Pak Mun group there are over 50 villages, in the Sirinthorn Dam group another 70 to 80 villages, and other problem groups throughout Ubon Province. And this is just speaking about Ubon. But we don't just work in Ubon Province, we work with the Assembly of the Poor right around the country... So, villagers must really depend on themselves to a great extent. They must really help themselves, because we have limitations, no power in

numbers to speak of. Because of that we do the things that villagers aren't able to, such as documenting information, producing documents and books, preparing information to submit to the government - we help with a lot of that.

Negotiation. Suppose there are meetings and negotiations, the NGO will send advisers and help the villagers prepare, plan what issues to prioritise, and we will submit a document summarising the negotiations to prevent any further distortion... And publicise news with the media, we try to give as much news to the media as possible... They want it quickly so we have to package it up for the media, we sum up the issues clearly for them...

NGOs have to accept that most of them are intellectuals (*panyachon*). University graduates like these here will be the brain matter of villagers' organisations, because villagers haven't had opportunities to study. We consider how to link these NGO workers with villagers, how to assist at the villagers' weak points in order to strengthen their movement (Interview, Maliwan, Mun River Villagers' Centre, Khong Jiam, 19-11-1996).

For their part, all of the villagers whom I interviewed held the NGO activists in high regard. Several used the metaphor, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, of "candles in the darkness" to describe them. A Sirinthorn Dam villager enthusiastically told me he felt they were "angels" (*thewada*) who should run for parliament. *Pho* Dam, an influential village organiser in the Mun River Villagers' Committee, said that he was suspicious at first that the NGO workers wanted to exploit the villagers' desperate situation, but he soon realised that they were "sincere" and "trustworthy". "But I still don't know where they get their income from," he added. Although almost no villagers criticised the NGO workers during my time at the Villagers' Centre I occasionally found evidence of conflict and subtle power plays. I tell a story of factional conflict within the Cooperative over investments, and the way in which the activists used democratic processes to manage the conflict in Chapter 7. Daeng, another leading figure among the Mun River villagers, told me that they had had "problems" with NGO advisers in the past when the conflict between Maliwan and PER erupted, and this had taught the villagers not to rely too heavily on them. Daeng also told me of a rumour going around some discontented villagers that one NGO worker with the Cooperative had exploited his position to gain corrupt kickbacks from a local contractor.

Siang talked about the relationship between the Mun River villagers' organisation and the NGO activists as "a pair of things that go together":

We villagers have local knowledge (*phumpanya*) about our own local area. We know full well what has been destroyed, what effects the dam has caused. We know clearly. But what we didn't know was where to travel to find the officials, which officials to go to. Where was EGAT's office? Where was EGAT's head? It was necessary to depend on NGO workers. They are one important group who joined with the villagers. NGOs are people who work to give information to our local leaders, but they don't come to tell us what this means, what that means. We understand clearly already. And one more thing, NGOs act as advisers for the villagers. We might ask if we do this will we be arrested? If we do this will we be attacked? Villagers had no experience about those things.

As for struggle, we already had experience of struggle. By this I mean we had fought against hardship, we had struggled for better lives for ourselves. But we had never fought against the state, we had never had to fight with authority (*amnat*). Therefore, I believe that NGOs and our struggle are a pair of things that go together (*pen khong thi khukan*). You can't have one without the other. But villagers must have order (*rabiap*). If the NGO advises us to go this way, we must go together... And the NGO workers must listen to what the villagers want. [NGOs and villagers are] different types of people but we must listen to each other. Different types of people but we must depend upon each other (Interview, Siang, Wang Mai Village, 2-7-1997).

Expanding Local Networks of Activism

While the Mun River Villagers' Centre provided a meeting place for villagers and headquarters for the NGO activists, the actual Mun River villagers' organisation was submerged in networks throughout the communities from which it drew its members. This network, which linked over fifty villages spread out along a forty kilometre reach of the river, hinged in turn on one or two organisers in each village who took on the responsibility of communicating between members in their village and the Centre. In an earlier quote Noi alludes to his work travelling from village to village to organise meetings, seek community volunteers to take on organising roles and thus build the network during earlier stages of the villagers' campaign.

These networks, however, extend far beyond the Mun River Villagers' Committee, as Maliwan mentioned above. As I have explained, the Mun River Basin Conservation Project was initially established to support the activities of the Mun River villagers' organisation, but within a few years the NGO attracted a growing network of villagers' groups from nearby local communities involved in conflicts with the state over development. The small group of activists based at the Centre were called upon to

expand their activities to provide advice and support to several emerging villagers' organisations wanting to campaign on a variety of grievances.

The first of these groups to ally themselves with the Mun River Villagers' Organisation was a group of villagers affected by the construction of the Sirinthorn Dam some 28 years previously. Later, in 1995 villagers in Chong Mek who lost their land to a state border crossing development project approached activists at the Centre. Some of these people were already members of the Sirinthorn Dam group and hence already had links with the NGO activists. Villagers opposing the proposed irrigation dam on the Dorm Yai River, a tributary of the Mun River, joined the network of villagers' organisations coordinated by the NGO activists in 1996.

The extent of the networks of villagers' organisations coordinated from the Centre was revealed to me vividly one day. Maliwan called a provincial meeting of Assembly of the Poor delegates three days before a national meeting was to be held in Northern Thailand. While she waited for everyone to arrive, Maliwan drew up a diagram on the blackboard representing the network of Assembly of the Poor groups here in Ubon Province (see Figure 2, following page). Nine groups of villagers were included under four different categories. Seven out of those nine groups sent representatives to that day's meeting. I calculated later that they represented more than 6,400 families, all coordinated by NGO activists here in the Mun River Villagers' Centre (Fieldnotes, Mun River Villagers' Centre, Khong Jiam, 23-7-1997).

Figure 2 shows schematically the full range of villagers' groups that have linked up with the Mun River Villagers' Centre over the last few years and come under the coordination of the NGO activists based there. They also include villagers threatened with eviction from their homes and land within recently declared national parks such as Tana Rapids on the Mun River and Pha Taem National Park on the banks of the Mekong. Representatives of all these groups meet on a routine basis at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, ensuring interaction between them. They attend each other's activities and support each other's campaigns. The Centre acts as the key link between these local villagers' organisations, and the regional and national NGO network, serving as local communications centre and secretarial office.

FOREST AND LAND NETWORK

DAMS NETWORK

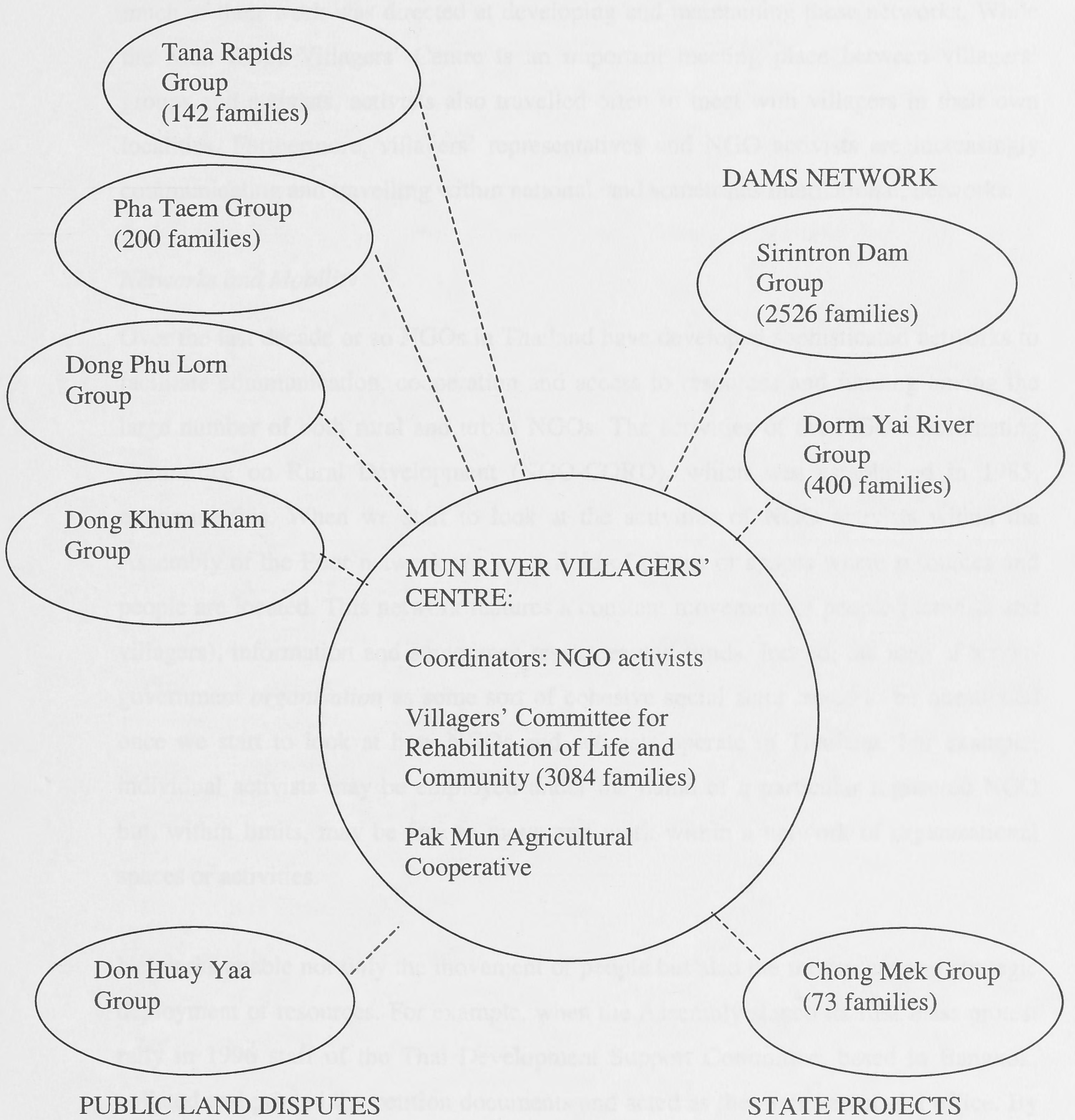


Figure 2: The Assembly of the Poor network in Ubon Ratchathani Province

The growing networks of villagers and villagers' organisations that the activists work with is also reflected in their own activities. During the time that I spent with them much of their work was directed at developing and maintaining these networks. While the Mun River Villagers' Centre is an important meeting place between villagers' groups and activists, activists also travelled often to meet with villagers in their own localities. Furthermore, villagers' representatives and NGO activists are increasingly communicating and travelling within national, and sometimes international, networks.

Networks and Mobility

Over the last decade or so NGOs in Thailand have developed sophisticated networks to facilitate communication, cooperation and access to resources and funding among the large number of both rural and urban NGOs. The activities of the NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD), which was established in 1985, epitomise this. When we start to look at the activities of NGO activists within the Assembly of the Poor network we see a field of places or spaces where resources and people are located. This network features a constant movement of people (activists and villagers), information and sometimes resources and funds. Indeed, the idea of a non-government *organisation* as some sort of cohesive social actor needs to be questioned once we start to look at how NGOs and activists operate in Thailand. For example, individual activists may be employed under the name of a particular registered NGO but, within limits, may be free to move and work within a network of organisational spaces or activities.

Networks enable not only the movement of people but also the movement and strategic deployment of resources. For example, when the Assembly staged its first mass protest rally in 1996 staff of the Thai Development Support Committee, based in Bangkok, collated and printed the petition documents and acted as the main secretarial office. By 1997 the FOP office performed this function. This fluidness of organisational boundaries and mobility of people and resources throughout the NGO network seems to relate to the multiple social sites and levels at which activists work and also the methods and strategies of grassroots development they employ. But also, at a very pragmatic level, it seems to stem from constraints placed upon NGOs by limited funding, resources and personnel relative to their social goals.

Thus, during my stay with the activists at the Mun River Villagers' Centre I observed a constant flow of people, both villagers' organisation leaders and NGO activists, through the network. Many of them live an almost nomadic existence, moving between village level meetings, regional-level meetings and national-level meetings and negotiations with government officials.

Somchai is a good example. Somchai was 27 years old in 1997. He was born in Bangkok and studied law externally at Ramkhamhaeng University. Student friends at university encouraged him to become involved in activism with workers' groups in Bangkok in the late 1980s. He joined the protests against unelected Prime Minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon that led to the events of "Black May 1992" and after that went to work with an environmental NGO in Phuket for two years. In 1994 activist friends invited him to work with the ASFN in the Northeast, and arranged for him to be paid a wage by the Duang Prateep Foundation as their coordinator in Ubon. Duang Prateep mostly worked with slum dwellers, "...but I hardly worked for them at all. I joined the Mun River villagers in their protests, and became an adviser to the Sirinthorn Dam group." Later the same year Duang Prateep stopped paying his wages but Somchai continued working on a voluntary basis with no pay until the ASFN took up the slack and gave him a small wage as its coordinator in the provinces of Ubon, Surin and Srisaket. When the ASFN was itself riven by factionalism in 1995 and many of its NGO workers left to form the Assembly of the Poor (see Chapter 2) Somchai was then employed by the Mun River Basin Conservation Project, which has been his source of income ever since. Although Somchai changed organisation three times in three years his actual work and responsibilities remained the same, basically as NGO adviser to the Sirinthorn Dam and Mun River villagers (Interview, Somchai, Tung Lung Village, Khong Jiam, 27-9-1997).

Somchai married a local woman whom he met during the Pak Mun Dam protest in 1994. They lived with other activists in a small rented house in Ban Tung Lung, a village about a kilometre from the Mun River Villagers' Centre. They had their first baby in 1997. By 1997 Somchai's responsibilities had broadened considerably. He acted as adviser to all of the Ubon-based villagers' organisations in the Assembly of the Poor. When I arrived at the Centre in June 1997 he was in Bangkok, attending meetings with the government to follow up agreements reached during the ninety-nine day protest.

When he arrived back a few days later, Somchai immediately asked me if I would drive him to meetings he had arranged with Dorm Yai River villagers and Sirinthorn Dam villagers, the two groups furthestmost from the Centre. In the following section I describe in some detail Somchai's meeting with the Dorm Yai River group, as an example of activism in action at the local level.

Along with Somchai, Maliwan was the other most mobile activist within the local NGO. In fact, they often travelled together. Maliwan's official position is manager of the Mun River Conservation Project and she is paid by that NGO. But during 1997 she spent very little time in Ubon working at the Centre. Coordinating joint activities of the Assembly of the Poor as a whole demanded more and more of her time. After the Assembly concluded their rally in May she stayed on and based herself at the Friends of the People office in Bangkok in order to attend the meetings of the various committees that had been established to address their demands. In July she returned to the Centre in Ubon for a few days, then travelled with several other NGO activists and villagers to attend the national meeting of Assembly delegates (*pho khrua yai* meeting, see Chapter 7) in a village outside Chiang Mai. Then she travelled to organise a protest rally at a regional cabinet meeting in Chiang Rai, before returning to Bangkok. Later in the year she travelled to Srisaket for a dams group meeting and to Kaeng Sua Ten in Phrae Province for the next three-monthly national meeting. I never saw Maliwan without her mobile phone hitched to her belt, and this was a very important tool for many of the activists that I met, enabling them to make telephone calls from just about any remote village or any situation.

Activism in Action: NGO Activists and Local Opposition to the Lam Dorm Yai Dam

On 28 June Somchai asked me to drive him to a meeting with the villagers' group opposing the proposed irrigation dam on the Lam Dorm Yai River, a tributary of the Mun River, about 30 kilometres west of Sirinthorn Dam. The previous year, after the Irrigation Department announced that the dam would be constructed, about 400 families from 24 villages who feared that their homes or land would be flooded contacted activists at the Mun River Villagers' Centre and subsequently joined the Assembly of the Poor. In this section I describe in detail the meeting with Lam Dorm Yai River villagers' representatives in order to illustrate and explore NGO activists' roles and

relationships with villagers, and how local activist networks are constructed and maintained within the Assembly.

The case study I present here highlights the work of NGO activists in supporting and maintaining the networks of villagers' organisations that they work with. In this case, Somchai had just returned from meetings with the government in Bangkok and takes great pains to explain in fairly simple terms for the villagers their progress and implications for their own campaign. He quickly assumes the role of de facto chair of the meeting. Of particular note here is that, despite his rhetoric encouraging the villagers' representatives to make their own decisions through democratic processes such as voting, Somchai skilfully guides the agenda, elicits a consensus among the participants and leads them towards outcomes that he values. He encourages the villagers to reach a collective decision to *take some action* on the problems facing them. Also, importantly, he promotes a culture of solidarity linking this group with the broader network of the Assembly of the Poor.

Even the success of this particular meeting depended on the communicative networks that had been developing among the activists and villages during the previous year. Two other young male NGO workers, Porn and Jip, had done much of the groundwork a week or so before, travelling to the area by motorcycle to arrange the meeting in consultation with some of the villagers' leaders. These key representatives, in turn, spread the word through their networks in 24 local villages and requested at least one representative from each village. Even so, on the day of the meeting 34 people attended, representing only 12 out of the 24 villages. The low turnout may have been partly because many of the villagers were still transplanting rice seedlings out into their fields now that the rainy season had started.

On the arranged day Somchai, Porn, Jip and I set off in my old rented car to Meuang Village near the Dorm Yai River in Det Udom district. We drove for two hours on roads that steadily deteriorated into a deeply pot-holed dirt track and finally arrived at the temple on the outskirts of the village. The temple meeting hall (*sala*) was full of people. We arrived at midday, just as lunch was about to be served. After the brief lunch in the *sala* the meeting resumed as a handful of young women cleared and washed the plates. We sat cross-legged on the wooden floor. Tong, a man in his early thirties, appeared to

be chairing the meeting and announced that soon they would hear from *hua-na* Somchai but that first he would ask Watthana, another male villager, to introduce another issue for the meeting to discuss. Tong gave Somchai the title *hua-na*, meaning “chief” or “head”, and this was commonly used as a politeness marker by villagers when talking with male NGO activists who were mostly younger than them. Everyone used Lao, except for Somchai. He mostly spoke slowly and clearly in Thai, but used an occasional Lao phrase such as *maen bo?* (“Right?”) signifying an acknowledgement of the local language and ethnic identity. Somchai also frequently used inclusive language to emphasise solidarity, addressing assembled villagers using the Central Thai phrase *phi nong* (“brothers and sisters”) and referring to *klum rao* (“our group”).

Watthana began by saying that most of them there knew about *Ajan*¹⁷ Prasit’s story already. He explained that Prasit was a village school teacher from a family with a long history in the local area. When he heard about the proposed dam, Prasit encouraged the people in his home village to fight against the dam. He consulted with a well-known engineer in Ubon University to obtain information and advice, which he then shared with local villagers. As a result, his Headmaster accused Prasit of inciting the villagers to protest, and he now faced investigation and disciplinary action by provincial authorities. “What can we do to support him? He’s still our heart and soul (*khwan jai*). He still finds information to support our fight,” declared Watthana.

At this point Somchai interjected to rephrase the question in Thai, emphasising that the teacher had helped “our group” and as a direct result now faced problems. Somchai asked the gathering what they thought about the situation. There was general agreement that they wished to help the teacher, but it was less clear how to do that. Somchai encouraged as many villagers as possible to give their opinion and then summed up their responses: “There have been two kinds [of suggestion]. Some say hunt up signatures for a petition. Some say we don’t have to do that; we should just go [ie take direct action]. What do other people think? Please help think it through first before we do anything. Firstly, you need to say what you think about this issue. Secondly, we need to consider our group’s preparedness (*khwamphrom*). Many people are ploughing their

¹⁷ *Ajan* is a polite title for teachers, highly educated monks.

fields. If we consider which option to take, we must also consider the extent of our readiness.”

After a few more speakers and the suggestion that they wait to see the outcome of the provincial inquiry, Somchai spoke up again. “For myself, I think that one aspect is that we would be helping our own group. How does it help our own group? First, telling the government that any member of our group can’t be persecuted. Second, it shows the strength and vitality of our group... Third, there may be outsiders who are keeping an eye on us, who are considering coming to assist us, but they might be other teachers in the local area. But they wouldn’t dare if they were afraid they’d face the same problems. They will dare to help us if they know that if they are accused of anything we will stand up for them. This is why I maintain that if we help Ajan Prasit we also help ourselves. Demonstrate our group’s power. Show them that we love each other, that we care for people who work with us. Now, a moment ago we had two options, gather signatures or go directly. What do you think? Do you support either of these, or maybe there are other options?”

Watthana pointed out that it was a case of “slit the chicken’s throat to show the monkeys” (*cheuat kai hai ling du*), a Thai expression implying that the authorities were trying to scare the rest of the villagers by making an example of the teacher. Somchai soon brought the discussion back to the two options again, but this time added that they could choose both. At this point several people spoke out in support of this. One older man declared, “Take both options together. Gather signatures and we’ll get a lot. We’ll only have a few people go, but we have to go.”

Once again Somchai spoke up on the issue of where to actually go to submit their petition: “Can I give some information on this issue? Teachers are overseen by the Provincial Primary Education Office and the District Primary Education Office. But one other place you could submit your petition is with the Provincial Governor, as he is the Chair of the Provincial Primary Education Committee. Brothers and sisters, who would you choose? The administrator of the Provincial Primary Education Office or the Governor?”

The villagers quickly decided on the Governor, and asked Somchai if he would go with

them. “No,” he replied, “I won’t go. You decided together and so you should do it together. But I will try to do two things. One, I will try to get it into the news, but I don’t know yet which newspaper will be prepared to send a reporter. Two, before we returned from Bangkok [protest] we secured an agreement with the Prime Minister that not one of our people would be persecuted by government officials, isn’t that right? In that case, I will raise the issue with the monitoring committee established to coordinate between us and the cabinet.”

Next Somchai asked the assembled villagers to decide when they would gather signatures for the petition and when they would submit it to the governor. Tong responded to this: “Each village’s organiser can collect and check the signatures. It will only take two or three days. We should set a day and go together, and while we collect signatures we can encourage people to go together... When you go home this evening call a meeting of everyone who will be flooded by the dam. You should know who they are in your own area. Have them all come together to sign the petition.”

Somchai reminded them that only 12 villages had sent representatives to the meeting, and asked if they could arrange to spread the news of their decision to the other 12 villages. He also asked *hua-na* Porn to help Watthana write the petition. As they discussed the final details Somchai hurried them to conclude so that he could move on to the next issue.

“Brothers and sisters, next I’d like to report on the results of the cabinet decision to establish committees and take action on our petitions after our ninety-nine day protest rally in Bangkok. The Committee for proposed dams tends to meet often, so that since the end of our protest they’ve met three times and set up a subcommittee which meets every Monday. They tend to be good, because all of the experts that they have invited to participate in the committee tend to agree about water management that doesn’t use dams, but they are not able to cancel them all at once. Therefore, they must study each dam and they’ve already established a committee to consider the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam. Our problem is that we tape record each meeting but we can’t play it to you because as technical experts they speak more English than Thai. I went and listened and was very troubled. I didn’t know what they said, only that it was English - technical engineering language. But to summarise, they see that the process of building dams has

real problems, and that there ought to be some other way instead, so they are studying the details of how that might be implemented. That's what I could follow in Thai, but as for the English, I don't know. Now, brothers and sisters, you don't have to be anxious - many people are anxious that they are going to build the dam during this time. But the committee maintains that, according to their authority and responsibilities, as long as they are working and have not reached a conclusion we can be certain that the dam will not be built. I believe that will take a year.

“Another thing that is more important: the irrigation department can't build the dam yet. Our group should think about what local people can do to ensure that we have enough water to drink and use, so that they don't have to build the dam. It is our river. How should we manage it to bring about the best results for ourselves? They [the Irrigation Department] talk about the problem of lack of water, so do we really lack water? If water for our rice fields and crops is really lacking but we don't want the dam, we must think how to address the problem here together. They have made their studies and we could simply wait until they build the dam - or, we could prepare our own catchment plan first.

“This is something that you all should think about. Therefore, if possible after transplanting is finished I'd like to hold a general meeting and talk together about how we're going to manage this here. I'd like to bring everyone involved from all of the 24 villages to work on our water management plan for the river basin... Some possible ways include asking the irrigation department to dig small reservoirs above areas prone to flooding, or locks on creeks, or canals. Therefore you don't need a dam. Or if we have problems of lack of water for rice farming we could make improvements like Grandfather Pong who used organic agriculture (*kaset thammachat*) methods. He doesn't lack water, he doesn't need chemical fertilisers, and it helps conserve the river, too.

“We need to discuss this again together and it's up to you whether you do it or not. I only pass on information. You are the ones to decide because these decisions affect your lives, not mine. Brothers and sisters, you are the basis of addressing local problems no matter how many outsiders come to help, because you own your livelihoods, own this locality, own the river basin resources. Can we agree now? If we want to hold a general

meeting where and when can we do it?"

Somchai promoted a similar idea a few weeks later at a meeting of about three hundred Sirinthorn Dam villagers' representatives at a villager's house in a resettlement community near the dam wall (Fieldnotes, Tambon Nikhom, Sirinthorn District, 18 July 1997). This meeting had been called to disseminate the latest information about government moves – in response to Sirinthorn villagers' petition and protest with the Assembly of the Poor – to pay compensation to families displaced by the Sirinthorn Dam almost thirty years previously. There was a great sense of excitement, as Somchai reported that the government had established a multi-million baht fund in preparation for implementing the actual compensation process. After bringing the meeting up to date, Somchai went on to suggest that they needed to consider what they would do once compensation was made. He argued that they needed to collectively manage and conserve the remaining forest areas to protect the quality of life of their communities. Somchai suggested that the Sirinthorn Villagers' Organisation develop a local forest management plan and promote environmental conservation among its members. The meeting responded to this in silence, appearing unenthusiastic. No further mention was made of the idea that day, but Somchai told me during the drive back to the Villagers' Centre that this was the first time he had raised it with them and he intended to keep promoting the idea at future meetings.

At the Dorm Yai River meeting no one questioned Somchai's argument about their need for a local catchment management plan. After a brief discussion about convenient locations, the villagers proposed meeting in a nearby village school in August after they finished transplanting. Next Somchai told them about the Assembly of the Poor *pho khrua yai* meeting coming up in Chiang Mai in July and asked who they would send as their representative. He reminded them that at this meeting their representative may have to participate in making joint decisions for the Assembly as a whole. This led to Somchai reviewing the progress and problems of each of the other groups in the Assembly, a few of which had been successful and had received compensation payments from the government. Thus, Somchai tried to link them into the broader network, its successes and its problems. Somchai finished up with news about an upcoming media visit:

“The good news is that a team of Bangkok journalists want to visit and investigate the local area for the proposed dam, maybe we could invite them when we have the general meeting. *Krungthep thurakit* (Bangkok Business) are coming for certain, and we have a group of friends from *Siam Post*.”

Finally the meeting concluded with a return to the question of who will represent the Dorm Yai Villagers' Group in the national Assembly of the Poor meeting. This was no simple matter. The Mun River Villagers' Centre pickup truck had space for only one person from their group for the trip to Chiang Mai (indeed, I had to catch the bus). Up until now, a small group of villagers had acted as their key representatives - *pho khrua yai*- especially during the protest and negotiations in Bangkok. Finally Somchai requested that the “original person” act as their representative this time, but I was unclear who that actually meant. By now we had been meeting for almost two hours. Tong asked if there was anything else to discuss and quickly announced that the meeting was closed. Most of the villagers dispersed on foot, a few on motorcycles. Two young men remained and continued discussing the issue of who to delegate to send to the meeting in Chiang Mai. Finally, before we returned to the Mun River Villagers' Centre we followed them to their village a few kilometres away to see the river. This village, flanking the river, lay just upstream from the proposed site of the dam wall. Dozens of houses bore hand-painted signs protesting against the dam.

Conclusions

Villagers and their organisations are predominantly anchored in their specific local conditions and grievances, and their activities within the Assembly of the Poor stem from this. NGO activists, on the other hand, move between the different local worlds, and between local worlds and national arenas, and are crucial in building networks and villagers' consciousness of shared problems and shared goals. They perform much of the routine work of maintaining villagers' organisations and networks. For these reasons the NGO activists, although very small in number, occupy key positions in the Assembly of the Poor network, as they possess the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973) of their higher education and literacy in Central Thai, as well as the links with national and international NGO networks which provide access to resources, funding and knowledge.

As Det Phumkhacha argues in a quote above, the experiences and ideologies of the 1970s activists and the 6 October generation are not uniform and homogeneous. Nevertheless, communist ideology and the experience of rural insurgency seems to have had a strong influence on the development-oriented NGO movement that followed. Ji Ungpakorn (1997:97) argues that the “blurring of class issues in favour of nationalism and the emphasis on the countryside are still major strands of thought in the radical sections of the NGO movement” that reveal this influence. Activists in the Assembly of the Poor say that the main legacy of the CPT insurgency has been the predominance of ideas of working with local communities and building community organisations in order to empower the poor (*sang amnat hai kap khon jon*) (Interviews, Sawat, Bangkok, 29-10-1997; Somchai, Khong Jiam, 27-9-1997). As I have mentioned in this chapter another important legacy has been the creation of a network of people – in the NGO movement, but also throughout many sectors of Thai society – who hold Leftist values of anti-authoritarianism, social justice and democracy, and who feel a sense of solidarity stemming from a common experience in the 1970s student movement and CPT insurgency.

As the account of Somchai’s work with the Lam Dorm Yai villagers reveals, activists act as “facilitators”, promoting processes of democratic decision-making and collective action by villagers themselves, as well as ideas of solidarity with other groups in the network. However, the high value which NGO activists place on villager participation and democracy, and the constant ideological refrain that power and decision-making rest with the villagers’ organisations, is contradicted by the power and influence which activists exercise by virtue of their position and education. I return to the ideology and practice of democracy in Chapter 7, where these contradictions continue to be explored. Nevertheless, I argue that villagers also hold a lot of power in the relationship and certainly do not see their NGO advisors in terms of patrons or leaders.

Rather, I argue that Siang was largely right when he gave his assessment that they are “two things that go together” in a dialectical interplay. There are several reasons for this that can be drawn out of the Pak Mun story. Firstly, the capacity of the villagers’ organisation to draw in people depends very much upon their ability to respond to local people’s grievances and their perceptions of their own interests. Secondly, the relatively small numbers of NGO activists by themselves actually had little they could offer local

villagers in terms of *economic* resources or political power through traditional political channels such as parties, wealthy influential figures or through the bureaucracy. Thirdly, villagers' accounts of their struggle reveal a growing confidence in their own collective agency and power. They describe NGO activists as their allies and advisers, not as their leaders. This is not to say that NGOs did not advise and influence villagers about organisation and strategies. The NGO network provided an activist infrastructure – which Suthy (1995) calls a “socio-political infrastructure” – that was crucial in accessing and disseminating information and news, and helping the villagers to get organised and seek out allies.

Villagers' organisations gain their power and influence from their claims to represent a broad social constituency of poor people – the “grassroots” (*rak-ya*). The Assembly of the Poor's primary political weapon is to *demonstrate* this grassroots power through mobilisation in high-profile, mass protests at strategic locations of power in order to compel the government to respond to their petitions and enter into negotiations. The following chapter presents an ethnographic account of one such demonstration, the Assembly's ninety-nine day rally in 1997.

6 The Village of the Poor Confronts the State: The Life of a Protest

*Marching in protest
Doesn't trouble anyone
We have the right, we have democracy
We're Thais all the same
But we're poor*

*Walking is an everyday thing
Like eating and sleeping
Walking doesn't trouble anyone
We use the strength of our own legs
To march to a better place*

*Politics is about livelihood
Like parents and children living properly together
Politics is engrossed only in the games of parliament
And so how are the countryside and village to speak?
We walk to vote in elections
Politicians say, our hope is the Thai people
But when we march in protest
They accuse us of causing a disturbance
But that's strange, politician's true feelings
(Carabao, *Doen khabuan* (Protest march) from the CD *Jaek kluay*,
Warner Music 1995)¹*

On Saturday 25 January 1997 the Assembly of the Poor began a mass demonstration on the streets of Bangkok. Thousands of villagers from the North, Northeast and the South began flooding into the city. Many pooled their resources and hired vehicles to ensure that they arrived in a show of force to launch the protest. Others travelled together in small groups to the city by train and bus. Hundreds of Bangkok slum-dwellers joined them. On the first day the protesters assembled several kilometres away and marched through the streets to Government House. Here they occupied the tail end of Rama V Road between Krungkasem and Sri Ayuthaya Roads, a stretch of approximately one kilometre (see Map 3, following page). Protesters continued to flood into the site for

¹ This song is not about the Assembly. It was released before the movement was founded and probably refers to ASFN and Isan Farmers' Assembly protests (Chapter 2).



Map 3. Central Bangkok, showing locations of Government House and Assembly of the Poor protest site.

several days.

When I first arrived at the protest two days after it commenced, people were still pouring into the site, lugging tattered bags of clothes, old sacks full of rice and food, and the odd cooking pot and charcoal stove. Metal barricades and protest banners marked the entrances to the rally from Phitsanulok Road. Police assembled near the entrance paid no notice as I walked past them with the flow of people and in through the barricades. Just inside stood a makeshift medical tent under a blue tarpaulin, staffed by white-uniformed nurses from a nearby hospital and already receiving patients. Rows of portable awning-style tents and make-shift shelters stretched away along both sides of the street, backing onto the mosquito-infested canal on one side, and the blank, grey walls of the Civil Service Commission building on the other. Further along crews of villagers erected more tube metal frames. Under the tents villagers had piled their provisions together and sat or sprawled on old tattered reed mats. Banners and display boards hung everywhere, making a backdrop of protest rhetoric, mostly in Thai, some in English.

I continued along the pathway through the middle of the ramshackle encampment. From loudspeakers somewhere a stream of announcements blared out over the site, drowning out the traffic noise from Phitsanulok Road. I came upon a stage that had been erected among the jumble of tents, protesters and provisions. A large elaborately painted backdrop rose behind the stage, featuring a giant fist rising beside the words: “The Assembly of the Poor demand what was promised 2” (*samatcha khon jon tuang sanya 2*). Under these words the painting depicted a sea of angry faces staring out, and interspersed among them, placards naming the main grievances of the Assembly: Dams, Forest and Land, State Projects, Slums, Alternative Agriculture. High above the stage were mounted two Thai national flags (see Photograph 1).

Panya Tongyu stood up on the stage at a microphone stand, making an announcement about the ban on alcohol and drugs during the protest: “If a member of the Assembly of the Poor drinks alcohol your membership will be cancelled and you can go to struggle somewhere else. Drunk people will spoil the image of the Assembly of the Poor in the mass media.”

I continued on past the stage, moving with the constant circulation of people throughout the rally site. Many of the protesters had set up small stalls selling fruit, vegetables, noodles, *somtām* (papaya salad), chicken and fish grilled over earthenware charcoal stoves. Mostly these stalls consisted only of a reed mat, on which produce was laid out for sale. The air was heavy with the smell of roasting chicken and fish, and the sour, acrid odour of fermented fish (Lao: *pā daek*), a Northeastern staple. Past the tents were parked two Bangkok Metropolitan Authority toilet trucks. They looked like dirty brown public buses, but foul-smelling water dribbled out of each and ran away to the gutters. Women queued at both. Finally, against the barricades, a small crowd stood washing in the open, ladling water over themselves from portable washing stalls, the men bare-chested in *phakhaoma* (loincloth) and the women discrete in their *phasin* (sarong).

The time was approaching midday and it was very hot already. The rows of tamarind trees spaced along the street gave only dappled shade and little protection from the heat. Even under the makeshift shelters and tents people sweltered. Women sat knitting and crocheting bonnets and other craft products they would try to sell later. Some men wove fish nets. The tents, food stalls, heat, constant noise and movement reminded me of the many village temple fairs I had attended; almost everyone was speaking Lao, the language of the Northeast, but then again Lao was common throughout Bangkok these days. The tiring, oppressing heat only lifted late in the afternoon as shadows cast by adjacent buildings finally fell over the protesters.

Panya descended from the stage and lead me to a group of villagers nearby who had staked out a section of the pavement with their mats and belongings. They were all family or friends from his village on the Mun River. This group made me welcome, probably because I had met some of them during my previous visits to the Mun River. They sat cross-legged on their reed mats, chatting among themselves and listening to the stage announcements. They prepared their food, ate and slept in this one spot for the next three months during the life of the rally.

During the days and weeks that followed I talked with them about the living conditions here, their roles in the protest and the progress of negotiations with the government. "Life here is difficult," they assured me. "At home it is difficult, but better than here.

Here it is not comfortable. We lie exposed to the sun, exposed to the weather, short of everything here like this, exposed to mosquitoes.” Lamkhang, a young woman told me:

It’s very difficult. I don’t sleep. There are lots of mosquitoes. It’s hard to rest during the day. There are queues to wash and we have to walk to the race track [bathrooms]. The government hasn’t agreed with our demands yet - if they don’t we won’t go home. The worst problem is going to the toilet! If it’s urgent they’ll let you go ahead of the queue, but if not you have to wait in line (Interview, 1-2-1997).

The heat only let up at night, but even then they found it hard to sleep. They slept on straw mats on the hard ground. They jokingly complained about the swarms of mosquitoes that rose from the canal and bothered them at night. Within a week or two donations of mosquito repellent coils and mosquito nets helped alleviate that problem. At night when the announcements and music from the stages finally stopped, the encampment looked like a huge billowing nest, as protesters settled down under their cotton nets. From March, an occasional storm burst over the city, drenching the streets. The protesters spent many sleepless nights standing, holding their belongings up out of the water running under their feet.

These conditions played havoc with the health of the protesters. Colds and flu spread quickly through the rally. During the day they besieged the “health centre” requesting medicine and painkillers. When sickness overtook them many protesters returned to their villages and homes to rest and recover before returning to the rally. Eight protesters died during the rally, two of them suicides. Three babies were born (Assembly of the Poor, 1997f).

Interpreting Protest

In the Introduction I raised the question of the extent to which the Assembly of the Poor has been able to transform unequal relations of power and effect meaningful social change. In their collective struggle the main political strategy, and hence source of power, of the Assembly is to mobilise villagers in high-profile, mass demonstrations to press the state to respond to its petitions. This chapter is an ethnographic account of one such rally. This extended protest represented a defining moment in the history and development of the Assembly for several reasons. First, it is during collective protest actions that the Assembly of the Poor actually exists most vividly in the immediate

experience of its members. Collective protest dramatises conflict and brings into relief issues of power and political strategy. Second, the demonstration, which endured for ninety-nine days, represents a historic achievement in its own right: Assembly activists claim that it “may be regarded as the longest lasting mass people’s rally ever [in Thailand] and has shown that it held to the principles of enduring, patient struggle and nonviolence” (Assembly of the Poor, 1997j). Over such an extended period of time social processes become more visible, but also *crucial* to the maintenance and mobilisation of people, social order and nonviolent conflict. A central aim of this chapter, therefore, is to reveal just how complex this demonstration was and to explore the processes and meanings through which it was socially constructed. In particular I consider how the Assembly mobilises people and resources, the internal organisation and the constitution of a protest ‘community’, the significance of space and place, the relationship between political consciousness and political strategy, and the responses of the state and the media.

Mobilisation to protest represents the main political strategy of social movements (Marx & McAdam, 1994) and yet it remains relatively under-theorised in the literature. Protest “has been considered as a form of action typical of social movements because, unlike political parties and pressure groups, they have fewer channels through which to access decision makers” (Della Porta & Diani 1999: 170). As Della Porta and Diani (1999: 170, following Lipsky) note, “protest is a political resource of the powerless”. Accordingly, protest is regarded as unconventional, as it falls outside of the ‘conventional’ political methods of influencing or participating in government decision-making processes (Ibid.).

The dominant approach to protest in the social movement literature is to render it in strategic and instrumental terms; that is, this perspective leads to an analysis of protest in terms of political goals and the types of strategies and actions available to dissidents to achieve those goals (Della Porta & Diani 1999; Marx & McAdam 1994). This approach is exemplified by the work of Charles Tilly (1978, 1986) and his notion of ‘repertoires of collective action’ that has proved highly influential in the social movement literature. Repertoire of collective action refers to the whole range of collective forms of dissent or contention that are recognised and deployed by particular groups in particular historical contexts. Tilly’s contribution was his analysis of the ways in which the repertoires of

contention of European peasants and revolutionary movements have changed with historical shifts in the political and economic organisation of European societies, and development of communication infrastructure, in the modern age. As Tilly (1986: 391-2) writes,

the repertoire of the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century had a *parochial* scope: it addressed local actors or the local representatives of national actors. It also relied heavily on *patronage* - appealing to immediately available powerholders to convey grievances or settle disputes, temporarily acting in the place of unworthy or inactive powerholders only to abandon power after the action (emphasis in original).

Tilly shows how this repertoire was transformed during the nineteenth century:

As capitalism advanced, national states became more powerful and centralised local affairs and nearby patrons mattered less to the fates of ordinary people....In response to the shifts of power and capital, ordinary people invented and adopted new forms of action, creating the electoral campaign, the public meeting, the social movement, and the other elements of the newer repertoire (Tilly 1986: 395-6).

Thus, Tilly largely sees collective action and protest in instrumental terms, constrained by available repertoires and shaped by modern locations of political and economic power and the influence of the mass media.

The usefulness of this approach to protest is not in dispute here. As I illustrate below, the Assembly drew upon a broad repertoire of collective action well-established within Thailand, including the mass rally, demonstration march, protest concert and non-violent civil disobedience. Their 1997 protest confronted the symbolic and practical centres of state power - Government House and Parliament - while at the same time addressing and crucially relying on the mediation of the mass media.

In contrast to Tilly, however, some writers argue that protest needs to be understood in more than strategic and instrumental terms. Firstly, as Rucht and Ohlemacher (1992:76) note, "protest campaigns can be seen as the outcome of a complex internal or semi-internal process in which collective identities have to be formed, organizations and networks created and people persuaded and mobilized for action". Certainly, the Assembly's protest campaigns represent the culmination of all the complex processes of organisation, mobilisation, networking and identity formation introduced and explored in

earlier chapters of this thesis. In this chapter I show how all of these processes underly the Assembly's 1997 protest, and that is why protest represents a privileged domain in which to study social movements.

Secondly, protest involves social movement actors in a cultural struggle to give meaning and legitimacy to their actions (Melluci 1998:425; Alvarez et al 1998:20). The power of protest lies in its expressive meanings as much as its instrumental purposes. The very act of protest expresses a social critique about the existing state of affairs (Guha 1997). Turner (1995), in an ethnographic study of Japanese workers in protest, shows how protest dramatises ideological and political conflict. A demonstration, she writes, is "a highly symbolic event, an occasion during which the fact of the struggle [is] brought front and centre, made more visible, and its meanings addressed more explicitly" (p.200). In other words, protest necessarily involves cultural struggles over meanings and representation. An example from the Assembly of the Poor protest that I present in this chapter is the representation of the rally site as the "Village of the Poor", symbolically bringing the rural village into the heart of the city and revealing it to be in a state of crisis and under seige from the very economic development that is underwriting urban prosperity. At perhaps a more fundamental level, the protest embroils the Assembly in a contest to be seen and acknowledged as a legitimate political organisation representing the interests of the "Poor" and able to assert knowledge in the face of silencing discourses of ignorance.

Finally, as I discussed in the Introduction, ethnography leads to a focus on the experience and perspectives of villagers and NGO activists in the Assembly, and their roles in the construction of collective action and protest. As Turner (1995:19) argues, careful ethnographic attention to the "choice of sites where people [are] actively engaged in efforts to transform their social worlds [makes] it easier to see the process of that transformation in both practice and conceptualisation, through time and in a rich context". Turner argues that demonstrations not only dramatise conflict but often encompass an intense emotional experience for participants that transforms their sense of identity and solidarity. "They were moving, all-encompassing, clearly bounded events in which some of the most important aspects of their social lives and identities were involved. And they occasioned lengthy reflection on identity, inequality, injustice, and

open conflict” (1995:217-218). Turner’s book highlights the “dialectical relationship between experience and consciousness” (1995:63) for participants in demonstrations. Japanese workers’ ideological attitudes and political behaviour were transformed through participation in union actions and demonstrations. Similarly, in this chapter I address this question of the relationship between political consciousness and participation in collective protest. I show that collective protests represent very important moments in the development of social movements and the experiences of those who participate in them. In Thailand NGO activists speak of consciousness being transformed through participation in these processes and of the poor being empowered through struggle.

There is a well-developed tradition and history of popular protest against perceived injustice in Thailand, especially against military dictatorship. But popular versions of that history have always valued middle-class protest for democratic reform, seen in the value and emphasis placed on the student-led mass protests of 14 October 1973 and the rallies of Black May 1992. These two mass demonstrations are regarded as progressive turning points in modern Thai history and are usually portrayed as predominantly middle class movements. Furthermore, many middle-class Thais express a widespread suspicion that villagers’ protests are manipulated or paid for by some “third hand” or social force behind the scenes. Rural villagers are regarded as uneducated and ignorant (which undermines the authority of their voices), and accused of being manipulated and mobilised by others. In this way the attribution of knowledge and ignorance (Hobart, 1993) is closely linked with the attribution of agency in political struggles. As I show throughout the chapter, these contests over the attribution and representation of agency and knowledge were played out during the protest rally.

Background and Course of Events

The protest rally which I describe in detail in this chapter was the culmination of a series of demonstrations staged by the Assembly of the Poor in support of their petitions to the state. When the Assembly of the Poor publicly announced its foundation and released the Mun River Declaration in December 1995, it also submitted a carefully prepared, written petition to the government detailing 47 specific grievances, and announced a 30 day deadline for a government response (Assembly of the Poor, 1996). To gain media

publicity and underscore their ability to mobilise for collective action, 600 Assembly representatives marched from Hualumphong Railway Station to the ASEAN Summit which was then meeting in Bangkok, where they attempted to present the Mun River Declaration to ASEAN delegates.

Dissatisfaction with government inaction on their petition led to mounting threats of public protest. Eventually the Assembly declared that a mass protest rally would begin on Sunday 31 March 1996 in the streets outside Government House. 12,000 people joined this first mass protest rally, which lasted for five weeks and won extensive media coverage and public recognition for the Assembly. The rally concluded on 23 April after the government of Prime Minister Banharn promised action on all grievances raised in the Assembly's petition. TV Channel 9 broadcast live the Assembly's final meeting with the Prime Minister before the rally dispersed.²

By mid-June Assembly representatives were complaining that the government had "failed to tackle their problems seriously". A committee headed by the Prime Minister, and including Assembly representatives and government officials, had been established to oversee the government response but proved ineffective. Furthermore, provincial administrators and police ignored the promises and agreements made by the central government (*Bangkok Post*, 11 June 1996:3). A delegation of about five hundred representatives returned to protest in Bangkok outside Government House from 13 to 19 August 1996, demanding that the government and bureaucracy implement the agreements reached at the end of the protest rally in April (Assembly of the Poor, 1997e). But the Assembly's agreements with the Banharn administration were doomed, as the coalition led by his Chart Thai Party collapsed on 27 September 1996.

Fresh elections in November brought a coalition led by the New Aspiration Party with General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh as Prime Minister. The Assembly of the Poor found that the state bureaucracy and new government were reluctant to implement the agreements

² This brief account of the 1996 protest is based on a number of newspaper reports, including *Bangkok Post* (27 March 1996:1, 31 March 1996:1, 1 April 1996:3, 16 April 1996:1, 23 April 1996:1) and Chitraporn (1996) as well as documents from the Assembly of the Poor (1996), and interviews with a

they had negotiated with the previous Banharn administration. In December 1996 they sent delegates to Government House seeking to follow up their petitions and seeking appointments for face to face negotiation meetings. Later, on 28 December, Prime Minister Chavalit announced that he would meet with a combined meeting of delegates from a number of farmers' organisations, including the Assembly, from 15 to 17 January.

At the same time, the Assembly of the Poor organised a series of meetings of villagers representatives to discuss strategies. The Assembly's network had grown and NGO activists now compiled a petition containing 122 separate grievances and demands for reforms in government policies (Assembly of the Poor, 1997, see Chapter 3 for more details on the points of the petition). During a meeting of 500 villagers' representatives at Khong Jiam on 14 and 15 December the delegates expressed enthusiastic support for a mass rally early in the new year (Fieldnotes, Khong Jiam, 14 & 15-12-1996). Then at a follow-up meeting in Buriram on 7 and 8 January 1997, they decided to withdraw from the meetings scheduled for 15 January. On 14 January Assembly delegates met with Prime Minister's Office Minister Chingchai Mongkhontham, resubmitted their petition and requested negotiation meetings on the specific grievances and demands, under the threat of a second mass demonstration.

When the Assembly returned to Bangkok on 25 January for their second mass protest rally they promised not to move until they saw "tangible" efforts by the government to respond to their petition. This time, they declared, hollow promises and powerless committees would not be enough. According to the Assembly, approximately 20,000 people joined the rally; at its peak in mid-March their numbers reached 25,000 (Interviews with Secretariat, Bangkok, 2-9-1997).³ Formal meetings with the government began two days after the rally commenced. One hundred and fifty Assembly

number of participants in 1997.

³ Although protesting groups tend to over-represent their own numbers in order to increase their political impact, the Assembly actually kept rolls of participants throughout the rally. Therefore, the Secretariat had access to relatively accurate numbers (Fieldnotes February 1997, Interview Wiset, Assembly Secretariat, 2-9-1997). The *Bangkok Post* reported 20,000 people early in the rally (6 February 1997:Outlook 1) and then tended to report numbers as "more than 10,000" (eg 24 April 1997). The *Nation* consistently reported 20,000 protesters (eg 19 March 1997:3). Other estimates in the media varied from 11,000 (eg *Sayam rat* 2 to 8 April 1997:20-21) to 30,000 participants in the Assembly's rally at Sanam Luang on 16 March 1997 (*Sayam post* 17 March 1997:1,8; *Naewna* 18 March 1997:1).

representatives and their NGO advisers met with government officials led by Chingchai Mongkhontham. Consequently, seven joint committees were established to consider the specific grievances of the Assembly (Supawadee Susanpoolthong & Yuwadee Tunyasiri, 1997). The seven committees corresponded to the seven categories of grievances presented in the Assembly's petition to the government.

Negotiations over their specific grievances progressed slowly, however. The turning point came in mid-March when the nationwide NGO community symbolically threw its weight behind the Assembly, demonstrating widespread middle-class support. To mark this show of support, the protesters marched through the streets and rallied in Sanam Luang, the famous public park near Thammasat University. After this the government accelerated its efforts. On 11 April the Prime Minister Chavalit became more personally involved and attended negotiation meetings for the first time (*Bangkok Post*, Internet Edition: www.bangkokpost.com, 4 May 1997). Chavalit agreed in principle to address all of the Assembly's grievances (*Nation*, Internet edition: www.nationmultimedia.com, 24 April 1997). Negotiation meetings speeded up. By the end of the month the cabinet had passed resolutions on all 122 grievances, including compensation for the Pak Mun and Sirinthorn dam villagers. The government committed itself to establishing a 1.2 billion baht fund which would then be used to compensate villagers affected by dams and other large development projects (Chakrit Ritmontri, 1997a).

The Assembly had promised to maintain the protest until "tangible actions" were seen to be taken, but after three months the protesters were exhausted and their resources at an end. The final decision to conclude the rally and return home was taken by a special public meeting which media reporters were invited to attend. The protest finally dispersed on Friday 2 May, ninety-nine days after it began. The government provided 91 buses and trucks to take remaining protesters to their home provinces.

Mobilising People and Resources

A key factor in the success of the Assembly in mobilising people to protest was its faithfulness to the specific grievances and aims of each group of local people who have joined the network. Concrete local problems and grievances caused by state sponsored

development constitute the foundation of the Assembly, and each and every one of these grievances is assembled into the list of demands presented to the government for negotiation. Therefore, every group that joins in a protest rally is motivated first and foremost by the material benefits it stands to gain for its own members. And this connection to local communities is vital to the ability to stage sustained mass protest rallies for long periods of time, not just in terms of numbers of participants, but for mobilising resources and supplies just to feed and sustain people for long periods of time.

Furthermore, each villagers' group or organisation in the Assembly had agreed to a social contract to support the petition of every member group and not withdraw or drop out in the event that its particular petitions were satisfied. Kan, a villager from the Mun River, explained the contract to me in these terms:

We agreed together that we would speak [negotiate] from the smallest problem first through to the largest problem last. We will wait until we are capable of addressing every problem before we return home together. People whose grievances have been fixed rest and wait to give encouragement to their friends from then on. This was the agreement of our group (Interview, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

While the written petition and the social contract not to withdraw prematurely from the rally were prepared and agreed upon well before the demonstration, the work of mobilising people at the village level largely fell to the *kaen nam*, or village level organisers of the Assembly. As one protester told me,

The *kaen nam* for each village arranged everything. Had us combine our forces. Whether there were a lot or a few of us [protesters] they got us to prepare rice, dried food and travel together to Bangkok. We prepared food, charcoal, rice, fuel and money and such to bring and buy food, enough to live for a few days. Won't last long. It's like this: we poor people brought our supplies here and those left in the village have nothing left to eat. My father and my child are back at home, I came here with my mother (*Mae Duang*, Interview, Bangkok, 28-1-1998).

Many *kaen nam* told me that they had been able to encourage more villagers than previous years to join the protest. Kan first joined the Mun River Villagers' organisation in 1994 and had acted as *kaen nam* in his village for the last two years.

Last year 30 people came from my village to join the protest. But this time three times as many people were inclined to join. 92 families registered their names. We don't lead them along pointing the way like the government. We point out the truth of our situation. We show them

that we are capable to doing things if we join together. And the people who agree join us (Interview, Kan, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

In mid-February, about three weeks after the protest began, I visited villages on the lower Mun River, to try to find out what was happening back in some of the protesters' home communities. In some villages nearest to the dam wall, almost every household sent representatives. For example, in Ban Hua Haew resettlement village every family sent representatives, as virtually the whole village had relied on fishing in the past. But, unlike many local Village Heads, the Head here actively encouraged every family to participate so that they would have a stake in the compensation pay-out expected to be won from the government (Fieldnotes and Interviews, Ban Hua Haew, Khong Jiam, 16-2-1997). When I interviewed him later he explained that as Village Head he could not participate himself, but he sent his wife as the *kaen nam* for the village, and often drove villagers in his pickup to the train station in Ubon, to help them on their way to the rally (Interview, Ban Huay Haew, 1-8-1997). The villagers said that there was a constant turn-around between the village and the protest site. One family explained,

People come and go. When they get tired, they return home. They might arrange for someone else from their family to replace them, or they might return themselves after a few day's rest. Yesterday a few groups returned to the village. They prepared fresh supplies and new representatives to go to the rally. If we don't go our name will be taken off the list (Fieldnotes, Ban Hua Haew, 16-2-1997).

In nearby villages, such as Ban Tung Lung, they told a similar story. When the rally began every family sent representatives, but three families returned home, complaining that they "could not stay under those conditions". As in most villages, they reported that the proportions joining in the protest rallies had climbed over the years.

I met many villagers who had returned home from the protest to rest or prepare fresh provisions. For example, I visited *Mae* Pla in her house a few kilometres north of Phibun township. She had returned a few days before with her mother and another villager, Kitthi, who were both ill with the flu. She was busy preparing rice and supplies to take back to Bangkok that afternoon. She would catch local buses to Ubon, where she would board the train to Bangkok. Pla is the *kaen nam* in her village. She tried to encourage a friend who lives nearby to go with her, but with no success. In her village, almost all of whom had relied on fishing before the dam according to Pla, only six families out of

about sixty sent representatives to join the protest. Pla left her husband and son at home to look after their house and their buffaloes. Kitthi is also a *kaen nam* from a nearby village. He recuperated at home with his wife for a few days and once he recovered he took some money, rice and food with him back to Bangkok. His young wife stayed at home to look after their two young children (Fieldnotes, Huay Sai Village, Phibun Mangsahan District, 17-2-1997; Interview, Kitthi, Bangkok, 29-1-1997).

In some villages I met people who said that they wanted to join the protest but couldn't afford it. They couldn't afford to go away from their homes for a long period of time and didn't have enough money for the bus and train fares to and from Bangkok. In some villages local people reported that the Village Head strongly discouraged participation, often promising villagers they he would submit his own list of villagers with grievances to the authorities.

This flow of people and resources did not just link the rally with rural villages, but with communities of migrant workers in Bangkok. A fundamental problem for villagers in even getting organised in the first place is the disintegration of village communities as rapid industrialisation and decline of the agricultural sector has forced growing numbers of villagers to migrate to the cities to seek work for the short or the long term. During the protest this massive sector of migrant workers provided another source of support for the Assembly's rally, although it is impossible to quantify the extent of this support. A great majority of the protesters with whom I spoke had family members working in Bangkok who paid the occasional visit and helped with food and money. One *kaen nam* put it this way:

You can see for yourself, the older people here who have come to fight - in the evening their children come to visit them because their children work here in Bangkok. It [migrant labour] is a way of life that breaks families up... Sometimes they bring money for their parents. They know that their parents are starving and tormented here so they buy food or supplies for them. Really, they're another source of strength for us... They can't join with us here as they have to work, so they bring money to support us (Interview, Tawi, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

Discourses of Protest and Nonviolence

The objectives of the Assembly's protest rally were clearly stated in the Assembly's petition, public announcements and documents such as three Assembly Publicity Leaflets produced during the course of the rally and published word for word in *Khaosot* newspaper (18-3-1997:31). The public announcements of the Assembly, which were mainly written by NGO activists, took pains to give legitimacy to the rally through describing it as a "democratic social movement" of the "people" and the "poor". They also appeal to their "freedom and right to rally peacefully and nonviolently" within a democratic system.

A discourse of protest was continually generated, discussed and disseminated throughout the protest site which emphasised the need of poor people to act collectively and the power they could achieve if they did. The other important aspect of their protest discourse was the constant reference to nonviolence (*santiwithi*; sometimes the Buddhist term *ahimsa* was used). To practice peaceful, nonviolent protest was argued to be a democratic right and according to social justice. If Assembly members enacted violent protest they would probably lose the support and goodwill they enjoyed from much of the print media and some sections of the middle class. But also, to appeal to nonviolent methods was an important means of protection from the deployment of military or police force against them by the state.

Almost every protester who I talked to about their methods appealed to nonviolence as the underlying principle of their rally. This quote from Panya illustrates:

We haven't come wanting to cause problems for the state. We haven't come wanting to make trouble with the bureaucracy. We have come peacefully and nonviolently; we want to be able to speak, to engage in talks about the issues. If we destroyed one official thing it would be over immediately, we'd be arrested, we couldn't stay. But sometimes our force puts pressure on them to take away any obstacles and smooth the way for negotiations (Panya, Interview, Bangkok 28-1-1997).

For the poor rural villagers and urban slum dwellers in the Assembly participation in such collective actions provided a key experience in developing and transforming their political consciousness. During the rally protesters were keen to talk with me about why

they had joined the demonstration, and about the methods of campaigning and protest available to them. Most of the villagers I spoke with emphatically said that they “had no choice” but to rally together in large numbers to force the government to listen to them. For example, when I asked Kan whether he thinks that the protest rally is the best way to campaign, he emphasised that they had tried other approaches:

We can't see any other way. We think that this is the best way, joining together in a rally to petition. We've tried other ways, like sending delegates to negotiate with the government, but we didn't get any results, so here we are. You could say it is putting pressure on the government in an indirect way, but we use nonviolent methods (*santiwithi*). I mean we don't make the villagers suffer, we place pressure only on the government. If it happens that the masses, mass media, the people of Bangkok see eye to eye with us no one will criticise us and our chances of success will be high.... There are other groups who have experienced problems for a long time, some for 10 years or more, but who didn't dare rise up and fight. But when they saw our assembly join together they came and joined in. Put simply, they depend on the power of joining together as one (Interview, Bangkok, 21-2-1997).

Siang, Chair of the Mun River Villagers' Organisation and veteran of many protest rallies, felt that poor, politically marginalised people had very limited strategies available:

According to my own experience we only have one choice. The struggles of villagers - if we fought using the law, we'd lose to them. If we took up weapons to fight them we'd lose. The people have only one way out, that is rally to present our petition (*kanchumnum riakrong*), give notice to the government and the public.... in our struggle we hold to the principles of nonviolence (Siang, Interview, Bangkok, 13-3-1997).

During the first few weeks of the rally, when the agency and legitimacy of the protest were coming under attack from some sections of the government and the media, such sentiments were often expressed by speakers from the stage and were sometimes rephrased to me in interviews and discussions with protesters. For example, when I interviewed Kitthi about the protest, he exclaimed: “We're poor people. We've got no money. No authority (*amnat*). We only have ourselves and the time to come and rally” (Interview, 29-1-1997). This was a common argument during the rally. For example Praphat (1997a:27) quotes another village leader:

We're poor people. Where are the poor to get money from? We have no money. We have no power (*amnat*). We have no weapons, prestige or high status. We have no position of authority. We don't speak clearly... We have only our feet. We must join together in large numbers, for long periods of time, before they will listen to us. Rallying together is the only

power that poor people possess.

A similar notion is expressed in the Carabao song which begins this chapter.

Accommodation and Containment by the State

The extent to which sections of the state accommodated and provided assistance to the protest raises the question as to whether the state was prepared to allow symbolic protest as long as it did not pose an actual concrete threat to state and elite power. The state had developed formalised, institutionalised responses to protest.⁴ For example, I soon discovered that the Government House employs a public relations officer whose job is to liaise with protest groups. A large contingent of riot police were stationed at the entrance of Government House for the duration of the demonstration. But on most days they appeared bored and uninterested, and spent their time languishing in the shade of a row of tarpaulins. According to several newspaper reports this was the first time that the government did not direct the police to prevent protesters from marching into the protest site (Chitraporn, 1996, Rooney, 1997).

While the police were deployed as a largely symbolic presence for most of the time, government offices organised some basic health and welfare services to the protesters. Tents, portable toilets and washing facilities, electric power, water tanks and drinking water were organised by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). The BMA arranged for a nearby hospital to provide an ambulance, medical supplies and staff for a makeshift “health centre” in a tent next to the barricades. A few days into the protest, the politically independent Governor of Bangkok, Bichit Rattakun, visited the protest site. Bichit addressed the protesters and promised to provide basic facilities such as water tanks, mobile bathrooms, health care workers and tents:

All the villagers who have travelled a long way from their homes really need public facilities like tents, medical care, water supplies and bathrooms. We came here to make sure you have enough of these facilities to meet your needs (Anchalee Kongrut, 1997).

⁴ This, of course, suggests that protests and demonstrations are not as “unconventional” a form of political strategy as some writers suggest. While Della Port and Diani (1999: 168) write that a defining characteristic of protest is its unconventional political nature, they do go on to acknowledge that in democratic industrial societies protest actions have increasingly been seen as legitimate methods of political participation and campaigning.

The Assembly of the Poor later published a summary of the kinds of assistance provided by state agencies (Assembly of the Poor, 1997a). The Prime Minister's Office hired 89 tents for the protesters at a cost of over 800,000 baht. The BMA and city utilities provided drinking water, electric power and portable toilets. When the Assembly decided to end its protest, the national government paid over one million baht to assist the remaining protesters to return to their homes, including hiring 93 buses. No doubt these measures by government agencies to provide basic shelter and health and sanitation facilities contributed to the ability of the Assembly to maintain their protest for a record ninety-nine days.

Another form of accommodation and containment by the state was the establishment of committees as the formal space for articulation of grievances, negotiation and bargaining. I explore this process further in later sections of this chapter.

The Village of the Poor: Space, Place and Protest

After I sat with the protesters for a few days it became clear that they worked hard at creating a peaceful, orderly and healthy community, highly aware of themselves as a media and public spectacle, and deliberately trying to present a good "image" (*phap-hot*). I began to see the amount of work and attention to detail that went into the creation of a public space of protest. A consideration of the strategic use of space and place may extend our understanding of the meaning and symbolic power of the protest.

Routledge (1993), in a study of environmental protest movements in India, argues that we must study the actual spaces and "terrains of resistance" in which social movements carry out their struggles and campaigns. Similarly, for the Assembly of the Poor the chosen sites of struggle were highly significant. Indeed, the space of the protest rally became an important social site (but not the only site) in which the members of the Assembly articulated and asserted their grievances, their agency and identity, and their demands on the state for social justice.

The choice of protest site is fairly obvious. The target of their petition was the

government. Government House, in the centre of Bangkok, is the practical and symbolic headquarters of the state and centre of power. In claiming this space they literally and symbolically confronted the centre of power, and were highly visible to the public, but also to Members of Parliament (MPs) and government ministers coming and going from work. But it is also significant that they claimed the streets and footpaths, which as many villagers reminded me, are public property and public spaces which should be accessible to everyone in a democracy. Protesters also marched to other important places with political significance, notably the Parliament Building (while parliament was in session) but also Sanam Luang, the public park near Thammasat University that has been the site of mass popular rallies marking famous turning points in Thai history. Not only did the protesters occupy and claim space which held symbolic and strategic significance, but they also strategically used the space of the rally to create a new, highly visible and symbolic place of protest, the "Village of the Poor" (*muban khon jon*) (see Photographs 7 & 8).

As they had done the year before, the protesters enacted ritual opening ceremonies for the Village of the Poor. They actually opened two, corresponding to the two sections of Nakhon Prathom Road which they occupied. Maliwan invited me to observe the opening ceremony for the second Village directly across the canal from Government House:

10 am. The protest site is barricaded off from the main road by a fence of metal barriers. A gateway in the barriers has been constructed out of bamboo poles holding up a banner declaring, "*muban khon jon 2*" (Village of the Poor 2). There are several journalists and photographers waiting nearby. A rowdy procession of several hundred people emerges from the other section of the rally site and surges across Phitsanulok Road forcing the traffic to stop and wait. The riot police standing nearby watch passively and make no move to intervene. About twenty villagers at the head of the procession carry stalks of young sugar cane. A monk splashes holy water over the gateway and then enters into the site, splashing holy water over sitting protesters as he makes his way to the stage. The procession follows. Villagers tie the sugar cane stalks to the bamboo poles at each corner of the stage and sprinkle more holy water on the sugarcane, the stage and the crowd. The ceremony finishes with a *phuk siaw*⁵ ceremony in this area around the stage (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 1-2-1997).

⁵ *Phuk siaw* is a Lao phrase for a ceremony in which participants tie cotton threads around each other's wrists, thus investing each other as *siaw*, or life-long friends.

The Village of the Poor symbolically brought the “rural village” into the heart of the city. In doing so the protesters disrupted common representations and stereotypes of the “village” and rural life as an enduring source of Thai culture and identity (For an account of the “village” as an element of Thai culture and identity, see Hirsch, 1991). This village symbolically represented a community in crisis, threatened by the very development and economic growth the city both symbolised and depended upon economically.

The Village of the Poor strikingly combined domestic activities of villagers with the signs and symbols of public protest. Everyday, even intimate, activities such as preparing and eating food, bathing and sleeping, were enacted against the backdrop of banners, stage, broadcast announcements, notice boards and poster displays, barriers and nearby riot police. In that public space even seemingly simple, domestic activities became symbolic, signifying the protesters’ persistence and resistance to the destructive affects of development and their intention to endure here in the rally site until the state responded. It also signified that this was a peaceful community.

Tents, provisions, banners, notice boards, shops, amplified announcements and music, and people sitting, lying, cooking and circulating, gave the impression of greater numbers of protesters than there actually were, and had carved out a new physical and social space for the protesters and their supporters to confront the centre of power. This helped to create an imposing appearance of presence. The numbers rose and fell during the three months but the encampments in the Villages of the Poor always looked populated and dense with protesters. In mid-March, after two months had passed, the daily meeting of the Assembly’s collective leadership (*pho khrua yai*) discussed a plan to make the Villages of the Poor into more permanent structures. The meeting resolved to request building materials from members’ villages in the provinces, if their negotiations continued to make no progress (Fieldnotes, 18-3-1997). This resolution was not followed through, but Assembly leaders were well aware of its symbolic potential.

Once the protest began, multiple spaces were created for the articulation and debate of the Assembly’s petition. NGOs and academics organised seminars in campuses around Bangkok. Assembly representatives and NGO advisers were invited to speak at various

venues. Maliwan gave the annual Komol Keemthong Foundation speech at Thammasat University which was chaired by prominent social critic, Sulak Srivarak, and attracted several hundred people. Maliwan spoke on the topic “Why must we help the poor?” and mainly gave an account of her work with Mun River villagers and their fight against the dam (Fieldnotes, Thammasat University, Bangkok, 20-2-1997). One villagers’ delegate leading local opposition to the Kaeng Sua Ten dam in Phrae was invited to speak at the inaugural World Conference of Dam-Affected People in Brazil in March (*Nation* 13 March 1997:4). In April, after the protest passed two months, the Northern Farmers’ Network mobilised about 5,000 villagers to rally at Chiang Mai City Hall, a further show of numbers in support of the Assembly’s demands (*Bangkok Post* 9 April 1997:1).

Organising and Sustaining the Village of the Poor

One day early in the protest I sat talking with *Mae Pla*. I asked her what she does each day during the protest. “*Bo dai het nyang!* I don’t do anything!” she replied ironically in Lao. But she immediately elaborated. “Sometimes I help them sell things in the welfare shop (*hang sawathikan*),” she said, gesturing towards a nearby stall. “I attend meetings in the morning and evening, and then pass the meeting discussions on to the group here, as I am *kaen nam* for this group of villagers. Sometimes they call me up on to the stage to speak. The [NGO] advisers often send reporters to me for an interview” (Fieldnotes, 28-1-1997).

Pla was widely regarded by fellow villagers as an articulate and clever speaker, so she was often chosen as a spokesperson for the Mun River villagers. She had a cheeky smile and spoke dramatically and passionately about fishing the Mun River and the impact of the dam. Often during our discussions and interviews the crowds of protesters sitting around us would fall silent and listen, smiling and laughing with her jokes or affirming her assertions.

I asked her about the welfare shop:

Each group of villagers from the same district has one. If you have nothing to eat you can buy something from the welfare shop, because our own villagers work it. We all put money into it as a revolving fund. You can buy from it, or if you have no money you can still get food. One part of it is welfare rice (*khao sawathikan*). Whoever has no rice, we give

them credit so that that group of villagers can buy rice (Interview, Pla, Bangkok 28-1-1997).

Villagers and NGO activists explained to me the complex and sophisticated organisation and division of labour during the protest rally, and invited me to various activities and meetings to actually watch it in practice. This was far from a disorganised “mob” as some sections of the media called them (for example, see *Thairat*, 27 January 1997:1; *Daily News*, 29 January 1997:1). Villagers’ leaders organised volunteers to look after the safety and security, health and well-being, cleanliness and sanitary conditions, as well as select their delegates to negotiate with the government. They relied on a system of collective leadership through meetings of elected villagers’ representatives called *pho khrua yai* (see Chapter 7), and networks of coordination and communication through the *kaen nam*. The NGO advisers joined their meetings, provided technical, secretarial and material support as well as coordinating with other allied organisations and the media.

Over 1000 men volunteered to act as “guards” for the rally, maintaining peace and order, ensuring that the rules (*kotrabiap*) were followed, and watching for outside agitators. The collective leadership of the Assembly initiated some basic rules which were designed to help maintain peace and a sense of community, but also to create a good image in the eyes of the media and the public. Such rules included a ban on drunkenness and the consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs in the rally site. Another group of volunteers, called *or sor mo* (an acronym adopted from rural development practice and meaning “village health volunteer”) and composed mainly of women, worked shifts sweeping the protest site and cleaning bathrooms and toilets at the site and at the nearby racetrack. Volunteer nurses (*phayaban*) treated minor ailments and referred sick protesters on to the professional nurses and doctors in the health centre. Other protesters painted banners and artwork, handed out Assembly leaflets at sites throughout the city, helped manage the two stages or performed music to entertain the protesters.

I have already mentioned the important role of *kaen nam* in mobilising villagers to join the protest. As Pla suggests above, these village-level leaders also played important coordinating and communicative roles during the rally. As she explained to me:

I join the *kaen nam* discussion meetings every morning and I also attend the negotiation meetings [with the government]. We depend on those of

us with a little knowledge to be able to explain to the other villagers about the progress of our campaign... We hold a meeting every day to discuss things together. At this stage we might discuss which groups are having problems, what sorts of problems, and discuss how we could assist them (Interview, Mae Pla, Bangkok, 28-1-1997).

During the demonstration the *pho khrua yai* met at least once every day, in public spaces near the rally site, usually Wat Benjamabophit or the entrance to the Racecourse (see Chapter 7 for more details). They discussed the progress of negotiations and the morale and mood of the protesters, planned publicity stunts for the media and reviewed the organisation and welfare of the rally site. *Pho khrua yai* also acted on the negotiating team for their local community, preparing and presenting their community's grievance and petition in negotiation meetings with the government.

Of course, different people displayed different degrees of commitment and participation in this range of roles and responsibilities. Some literally did nothing but attend the rally to make up the numbers and register their family's name on the rolls of petitioners. Others acted in multiple roles and responsibilities in the work of protest, particularly villagers who acted as *kaen nam* and *pho khrua yai*. Panya is one example. He was a veteran of several protest rallies, including the Mun River villagers' five month long rally at the dam site in 1994/95. He was the *kaen nam* for his village. He was also a delegate on the negotiating team for the Mun River villagers and was highly regarded for his abilities as a public speaker and spokesperson for the Mun River fishers. Panya was part of a team of six people who managed the stage in Village No. 2. Most days he took the stage to explain the progress of negotiations or announce activities planned for Assembly members. In this role he also screened prospective speakers, making sure that they would not say anything over the Public Address system that would damage the public image of the Assembly. On many evenings he entertained the crowd with *mo lam* folk songs that he had composed himself, one of which begins this study. Panya's experience as a *mo lam* singer showed in his confidence and eloquence as a public speaker and performer. Indeed, in Northeastern village culture, a high value is placed on being able to perform or speak charismatically (Lao: *wao muan*) in public.

Protest as Ritual and Spectacle: Protest Street Theatre

Through the stage announcements and daily meetings the protesters continually talked to each other and re-invented discourses and rituals of community and solidarity. They also creatively invented and sought new actions and rituals of protest to attract media and public attention. Almost every day they organised and staged events for the benefit of the media and their own morale and solidarity. Although the Assembly strictly adhered to the ideology of nonviolent protest, several times during the rally they took direct action in a more provocative manner to try to pressure the government to respond more quickly to their petition. These more confrontational forms of protest were more risky, as they involved more direct antagonism and inconvenience of MPs and government officials and therefore risked intervention and suppression by the police force.

For example, several times the protesters left the rally site and marched through the surrounding streets as a show of strength and to reassert their presence. On the morning of 20 February most of the protesters left the site and marched in a huge procession to the gates of the National Parliament building two streets away. A small group of police stood by just inside the locked gates. Parliament was sitting at the time, on the last day of the current session. Protesters congregated around a pickup truck with loudspeakers at the front gate, calling on the government to introduce and debate the Assembly's petition in parliament (Fieldnotes, 20-2-1997).

In April after over two months and with rising frustration over the government inertia and failure to take tangible actions on the Assembly's petitions, protesters blockaded Government House for several hours in the afternoon after they discovered that their petition was not discussed in the Cabinet meeting that morning. They blocked all the main entrances and exits to the compound, demanding to meet the Prime Minister face to face before ending the blockade, and effectively kept the Prime Minister and several ministers trapped inside for several hours. They pelted Deputy Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej with plastic bottles and mango stones when he tried to leave. Eventually, the blockade ended when the Rector of Thammasat University was asked to negotiate on behalf of the government with the protesters (*Bangkok Post*, 9 April 1997:1, *Nation*, 9 April 1997:1).

Assembly protesters continually extended the ritual repertoire of protest and invented new activities. Recognising the need for newsworthy items for consumption by the media they enacted or adopted rituals almost every day for entertainment, symbolic protest and media spectacle. For example, to mark two months of rallying on the morning of 25 March protesters roped off a boxing ring on the stage and performed a symbolic boxing match (see Photograph 13). Media reporters and photographers, alerted before hand, attended in force. In the final bout a skinny older man, representing the Assembly of the Poor, squared off against a fat opponent, representing Prime Minister Chavalit. The boxer playing Chavalit acted defensive and evasive, and of course was soundly defeated by the Assembly's representative (Fieldnotes 25-3-1997). Not only did the boxing create amusing entertainment for the protesters themselves, but also provided highly dramatic and colourful images that appeared on the front pages of most of the major newspapers the following day (see, for example *Khaosot*, 26 March 1997:1, *Bangkok Post*, 26 March 1997:1).

Another example of symbolic drama which the Assembly performed to attract media attention was a ceremonial launching of a small raft into the Prem Prachakorn canal one month after the rally began. Villagers constructed the small raft from bamboo poles and plastic drums. At 2 pm they carried it at the head of a procession to the bank of the canal opposite Government House. The protesters carefully lowered the raft to the water and held it steady while a middle-aged man and woman boarded. Then they launched the raft away from the bank and into the middle of the canal. A declaration painted on the fabric roof of the raft made its dramatic and symbolic meaning clear: "If you are going to set us adrift and not address our problems, poor people in poverty... we will leap into the water and drown if you don't address the problems of the poor." As the raft floated calmly in the middle of the canal, the man took hold of a rope noose suspended from a beam above him and pretended to hang himself (Fieldnotes 24-2-1997). The following day dramatic photographs of the hanging on the raft appeared in the daily newspapers (for example, *Naewna*, 26 February 1997, *Bangkok Post*, 25 February 1997:3 and *Nation*, 25 February 1997:3). The couple, of course, represented the members of the Assembly, and the raft and their performance provided dramatic visual images symbolising the dire straits of the poor if ignored and set adrift by the government.

Nurturing our Image: Assembly of the Poor and the Media

These sorts of strategies proved very successful in gaining media coverage on an almost daily basis in the newspapers and nightly television news bulletins. The media, of course, was a key mediator in the dispute, as the primary source of information and interpretations of the Assembly for the wider public. The Assembly's success in marshalling media support also stemmed from networks of journalist allies in media organisations and NGOs. NGO activists told me that they worked closely with several sympathetic media reporters, including newspaper journalists at *Krungthep thurakit* (Bangkok Business), *Daily News*, *Khaosot* (Fresh news), the English language newspapers, *Nation* and *Bangkok Post*, and television journalists from the program "Face the Environment", on iTV.

The newspaper *Khaosot*, for example, published a series of three long feature articles written by the Assembly's secretariat explaining in detail its membership, grievances, petition, policy platform and environmental ideology (1997b; Assembly of the Poor, 1997m). During the protest three villagers were invited to compete on a TV quiz show and their winnings were donated to the Assembly (This was related to me later at a *pho khrua yai* meeting, Fieldnotes, 20-10-1997, Don Chai Village, Phrae). The popular daily newspaper *Thairat* reported on protest activities and the progress of negotiations on an almost daily basis for the duration of the rally, frequently on the front page.

Praphat (1997b) found that the evening news on every TV channel regularly carried news bulletins about the Assembly during the protest. In addition, he reports that there were at least ten "specials" about specific aspects of the Assembly broadcast during that time, as well as current affairs panel shows featuring Assembly representatives, government representatives and academics. In his survey of the daily newspapers Praphat found extensive coverage of the rally, the points of the Assembly's petition and day to day progress of negotiations. He also reports that at least 128 feature articles, such as editorials and analysis, were published in addition to the daily news stories. He found that, over all, the press remained supportive and were very effective in disseminating information about the Assembly to a wider public. This aggravated some MPs. Early in

the rally the Interior Minister, Sanoh Thienthong, exclaimed, “Don’t go and read the newspapers. Watch the television, because the newspapers’ reporters all side with the mob (*khao khang mop*)” (*Sayam Post* 27 January 1997, quoted in Praphat, 1997b:33).

Nevertheless, attacks were made in the media and often aimed at undermining the agency and legitimacy of the protesters. The Assembly was criticised for causing a disturbance and creating social conflict, accused of disrespecting the law and the principles of democracy, and of being a minority unwilling to sacrifice for the development of the nation as a whole (Praphat, 1997a:33). Interior Minister Sanoh accused the Assembly in the media of being a “paid mob” (*mop rap jang*) (*Thairat* 27-1-1997:1). The *Daily News* (29-1-1997:1) accused Assembly leaders of taking 100 baht per person with the promise of freeing them from their agricultural debts.⁶ Some commentators in the media claimed that there was a “Third Hand” (*meu thi sam*) behind the scenes manipulating the rally. This accusation seemed to strike a chord in the public rumour mill and many “ordinary” people that I talked to in Bangkok and Khon Kaen (including taxi drivers, business people and university lecturers) suspected that the Assembly was a “paid mob” bankrolled by some influential group, such as opposition parties wanting to discredit the government. A more sophisticated version of this claimed that the agency behind the protest was actually the NGOs, which were financed and hence actually controlled by foreigners. For example, as mentioned earlier, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister, Chingchai Mongkhontham, concluded an interview on a current affairs program on Channel 9 one night by saying, “We know who the third hand behind the Assembly of the Poor protest is. It’s the NGOs” (Fieldnotes, Khong Jiam, 15-2-1997).

Even sympathetic journalists sometimes raised the issue, perhaps to give villagers a chance to refute it. On Friday afternoon after the first week of their protest, iTV sent a news crew to interview Assembly of the Poor representatives in the midst of the rally. The interview was broadcast nationally live on iTV at 2pm. One of the first questions asked by the reporter was whether the Assembly of the Poor had been paid to come to

⁶ A moratorium on agricultural debts with the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives was not part of the Assembly’s petition. This campaign was being pursued by the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast at the time.

protest. Siang, one of six villager delegates, quickly rejected the idea:

Siang: No-one was paid to come and protest. We all came because of our troubles and problems. Although the government makes promises we have to keep struggling until they make tangible efforts.

Reporter: I'd like to ask, do the NGOs, private organisations and students go and incite you to come by saying that if you don't come your problems will never be fixed? Do they or don't they? I ask sincerely.

Siang: That's just not true at all. Myself, for example, I've been saving every baht every satang for a long time to have money to come to Bangkok.

Reporter: Let's go to the dam problems... (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 31-1-1997)

A few minutes later the reporter asked another villager representing the Land and Forest Group if he knew the leaders (*phu nam*), referring to the twenty-three NGO advisers. He replied that because of their previous education and experience advisers such as *Khun*⁷ Bamrung assist them with information and knowledge.

Reporter: But where do they get the money from to do that? I'm suspicious of how they make their living.

Villager: On this point I'm not suspicious, because they live with the villagers. We invite them... I don't know of anything that they gain. We depend on them greatly... (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 31-1-1997)

The reporter then turned to each of the six villagers' delegates to ask about the particular problems of their group. The group interview lasted for almost an hour.

The Sanam Luang Rally: Demonstrating Strength and Support

After the first month of the protest the Assembly saw little progress in its negotiations with the government. As I mentioned above, the Prime Minister established seven committees to consider and negotiate the details of the Assembly's petition, but these met infrequently and were very slow to reach conclusions. By 11 March, six weeks after the rally commenced, 29 grievances out of the total of 122 had reached a conclusion that had then been ratified by cabinet. The NGO activists and *pho khrua yai* became

⁷ A title placed before the first name of men or women showing respect.

concerned that the protesters' morale was flagging and would not be able to sustain the demonstration. Bureaucratic red tape and government inertia might defeat their protest. Their answer was to try to mobilise the NGO sector to demonstrate middle class support for the Assembly, both as a way of putting more political pressure on the government to act and to revive the morale of the rank and file protesters. The result was a joint delegation and petition to Prime Minister Chavalit representing 182 NGOs from around the country and a mass rally at Sanam Luang in which the Assembly of the Poor was joined by representatives from its allies.

Sawat, a senior NGO activist, described the lead-up to the Sanam Luang rally this way:

At that time we looked at the situation. It looked hopeless (*yae leoi*). The government was giving us trouble. We could see that the villagers' enthusiasm would run out after a month and a half, so we considered what strategy to take. We needed the middle class to help us. We had been skilful at developing our organisational structure, management, and supporting the villagers' leaders - but we were about to lose! Therefore we realised that we had to draw in the middle class to help us. We realised that we'd forgotten alliance building! The advisers raised this with the assembly. So, after that we visited different universities and asked them to get involved. I went to Chiang Mai. I went to talk with NGO workers, activist intellectuals. So after that we began contacting middle class NGOs, such as the Campaign for Popular Democracy, asking for help. And we staged the Sanam Luang rally to try to educate the middle class and give a show of support. And after that Chavalit agreed to talk with us! (Interview, Bangkok, 29-10-1997)

The secretarial office of the Assembly began publicising the rally many days before hand, notifying the media, arranging the printing of publicity leaflets about the Assembly's grievances which invited the people of Bangkok to attend. The NGO activists used their contacts and the well-developed NGO network coordinated by NGO-CORD, the Thai Development Support Committee and the Thai Volunteer Service to rally organisations throughout the country to throw their weight behind the Assembly and petition the government. On 11 March delegates from human rights organisations and other NGOs met Prime Minister Chavalit to present a petition, undersigned by 182 organisations, calling on the government to respond more quickly and efficiently to the Assembly's petition (Assembly of the Poor media release 11-3-1997, Chakrit Ritmontri, 1997b). By the day of the rally, Sunday 16 March, 206 organisations had signed their support (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 16-3-1997).

Many protesters told me that they felt “very proud” of the public recognition and support. Throughout the rally protesters spoke of a renewed sense of enthusiasm (*kamlang jai*) and determination to endure until the government responded to all their petitions. Panya said to me, “It is an important point in the history of the Assembly when 206 organisations have publicly supported us.”

On the day of the rally most of the organisations dispatched representatives to travel to Bangkok to join the rally and deliver donations of rice, food and supplies. For example, that evening I met up with a group of twelve delegates from the Nam Pong River Rehabilitation Project in Khon Kaen Province. Half of them were villagers and half NGO workers. They had all driven from Khon Kaen that day in a pickup truck which they shared with a load of rice and fresh vegetables to donate to the rally. After attending the rally at Sanam Luang for four hours they visited the protest site at Government House to deliver the donations and then returned to Khon Kaen.

The march from Government House and rally at Sanam Luang were well-organised and enacted displays of protest street theatre that activists and villagers hoped would gain greater support and understanding from members of the Bangkok middle class. The villagers left the rally site and began assembling on Sri Ayuthaya Road outside Wat Benjamabophit at 1pm. It was a very hot, scorching day, and I heard Maliwan instructing the procession marshals, many of whom were student activists, to wait until after 2.30 in the hope that the heat would ease. As we waited the “music for life” protest anthem, *Doen khabuan* (“Protest march”), rang out over the assembled marchers (see the prologue to this chapter). It boomed out from a powerful PA system mounted on a truck which was to lead the procession.

We marched along Sri Ayuthaya Road, down Ratchadamnoen Nok Road and along Ratchadamnoen Klang Road to Sanam Luang park (see Map 3, Photographs 9-12). The procession, an impressive show of strength in numbers, stretched for almost two kilometres. Leading it, three villagers carried photographs of the King (Photograph 9). Behind them walked bearers holding aloft bright yellow flags with the words Assembly of the Poor in both Thai and English. Some simple props made the procession colourful

and spectacular. Almost every person had been issued with a hand-held “Assembly of the Poor” flag in bright red, yellow or green; the procession looked like a field of waving colour.

Behind the flag bearers, protesters carried a series of banners, paintings and models symbolically representing the destructive effects of development. For example, one painting depicted a double-headed monster with a huge, gaping mouth devouring the countryside, and a model of a dam feeding electric power to the city on one side, while behind the dam rising water drowned the rural countryside and its inhabitants (see Photograph 11). Another painting used concise and striking symbolism; it depicted a dam wall labelled “Irrigation Department” and “EGAT” opening up to reveal a sea of skulls behind it with blood trickling down from them. Villagers from a community in Khon Kaen Province (which has become famous for discoveries of petrified dinosaur bones) constructed a large wood and papier-mâché dinosaur and carried it to the rally; on its side they painted the words “The Thai bureaucratic system”. Protesters carried a series of banners declaring the different grievances of Assembly members. They donned costumes to dramatise their claims. At one point in the procession a group carried a banner declaring, “If you build this dam, then...”. Dozens of women and men followed, dressed as prostitutes with bright make-up and adorned in colourful rags. Another banner followed, “Or this...”, leading a group of older women carrying begging bowls.

The protesters marched into Sanam Luang and occupied an area in front of a huge stage that had been prepared for the event (see Photograph 12). A large and elaborate backdrop adorned the stage, depicting the Assembly of the Poor marching through the streets of Bangkok, parts of which were barricaded behind high walls and barbed wire, and carrying a banner declaring “Poor people join forces together” (*ruam phalang khon jon*). A large contingent of police (about 300) had come in a fleet of buses and were stationed nearby under marquees where they remained, appearing mostly bored and disinterested for the whole evening. Assembly of the Poor representatives and newspaper reports estimated that 20,000 to 25,000 people attended the rally (see earlier footnote).

The rally opened with a Buddhist prayer (victory blessing, *suat chaya mongkhon*) and ceremony by a monk. Assembly representatives presented robes and gifts to the monk

(*thot pha pa*), who then blessed the stage with holy water (*nam mon*) and descended to walk among the crowd sprinkling the holy water over the heads of sitting protesters.

The presentations and performances from the stage that evening addressed two audiences: Bangkok residents and representatives of allied organisations who had been invited to attend, but also the protesters themselves. The program consisted of a series of presentations and speeches by Assembly members and NGO activists, interspersed between musical and cultural performances by different groups in the Assembly. A young NGO activist and consultant to the Assembly acted as master of ceremonies. He began by addressing the middle-class residents of Bangkok:

The Assembly of the Poor consists of one part of the population who are suffering from serious problems. We came here because others have infringed our civil rights, especially government officials. Our problems also stem from the unmanageable and inefficient government bureaucratic system. We have come to protest peacefully and nonviolently. We request the understanding and support of the urban middle class (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 16-3-1997).

The speakers introduced the different groups who are represented in the Assembly and explained how the protest rally was organised. They read out lists of people who had made donations and announced the total amount. Representatives from other organisations, such as the Student Federation of Thailand, NGO-CORD and a labour union leader, made speeches offering support and encouragement to the Assembly.

Between these announcements and speeches, a number of groups performed. Several professional bands, such as Paradorn, Khitanchalee and Sek Saksit, performed protest “music for life”. Groups from within the Assembly performed their own traditional music, including Karen and other hill tribe groups, Southern Thais and Isan performers. Isan women performed a traditional dance. The rally closed at midnight with a song of respect to the King. Many protesters had already left by then, exhausted, and made their own way back to their encampment outside Government House. Those who stayed to the end quickly dispersed and walked back in dribs and drabs.

At one level the performance of music and dance provided fun and entertainment for the evening. But at another level the cultural performances by groups within the Assembly

demonstrated the persistence of their local cultures and identities despite the effects and depredations of “development” - persistence as resistance. This impressive display of cultural resources that the Assembly of the Poor was able to deploy during the protest was another way of asserting the voice and agency of the “poor.”

The Assembly of the Poor appealed to and expressed the national identity and ideology of Nation, Religion and King in its campaign and during this high-profile march and rally. This representation of Thai identity and nationalism has long been a prop of elites in power. But most of the rural villagers identify with Buddhism and the monarchy, which they see as powerful and inclusive reference points which unite all Thais. Thus, rituals marking respect to the King and Buddhist merit-making ceremonies are as much a way of constructing and maintaining unity and solidarity within the Assembly, as they are deployed to signify shared identity with other sections of Thai society and assert their rights as citizens. In other words, the Assembly of the Poor uses the nationalist ideology of Nation, Religion, King to seek the moral support and sympathy of the middle classes and reject the ideology of difference and otherness that is attached to protesting peasants and urban poor.

Speaking the Language of Power: Negotiation Meetings⁸

The petition by allied organisations and Sanam Luang rally did seem to mark a turning point in the Assembly’s negotiations with the government. The committees met more frequently and allocated longer periods of time for discussion. The committee established to consider the petitions on dams finally began hearing the Mun River villagers’ petition two days after the rally on Tuesday 18 March. It convened for two hours that day and then for another two hours a week later on Tuesday 25 March. In an effort to speed up negotiations the committee chair scheduled two more days later in the same week for meetings. Assembly representatives interpreted this a desire on the part of the government to move fairly quickly towards an agreement on compensation, but the process ended up taking much longer and by the middle of April were bogged down once again.

⁸ I have borrowed this phrase from Fetterman (1993).

In order to explore and illustrate the negotiation process I will describe in some detail the meeting on Thursday 27 March (drawing on Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 26 & 27-3-1997). This meeting, like all of the others that I observed, became a struggle over agency and knowledge; in other words who had the legitimate right to *act* and even to *speak*, and the forms of knowledge that would be accepted as legitimate and having authority in the debate. Having won the right to negotiate through their demonstration, villagers still found their right to petition attacked or undermined by state bureaucrats. Closely related to this struggle was a conflict over what constituted “expert knowledge” and valid “data” on the affects of the dam on Mun River fisheries.

Before each negotiation meeting with the government, Assembly delegates held their own meetings to review their arguments and practice negotiation skills. On Wednesday 26 March the Mun River villagers delegates and their NGO advisers met twice, once in the morning in a shady area of Dusit Zoo, and again in the evening in the grounds of Wat Benjamabophit. The villagers were hopeful that the negotiations would reach a conclusion soon. Several times during these meetings they role-played dress rehearsals for the upcoming negotiations in which one of the activists would adopt the role of chair and address the villagers to force them to express and clarify their arguments. They also discussed whether to use Thai or their own local language, Lao, in the negotiations. They settled on Lao as none felt skilful enough in Thai. “Besides,” they commented to me, “the chair and most of the officials are from Isan and so understand perfectly well.”

When I arrived the next morning (27 March) I found that no one had slept during the night as heavy rain fell for several hours. The whole protest site was damp and everything was covered with clothes and fabric spread out to dry. Around 1 pm two city council buses picked up the negotiating team, several NGO activists and dozens of Assembly members going to observe the negotiations. The buses took us to the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment building a few kilometres away on Yothi Road.

We climbed the stairs to the meeting room on level 4. The room had tables arranged in a large U shape. The government representatives and bureaucrats all sat together on the

chair person's right hand side, while the Assembly of the Poor representatives all sat on the left. Rows of chairs against the two sides of the room accommodated observers. By 2.10 about 15 government officials, many in uniform, had arrived. They included officials from the Department of Fisheries, EGAT, the Government Prosecutor's Department (*ayakan*) and Ubon Provincial officials. On the Assembly side there were about 12 people, including seven villagers' delegates, Maliwan and other NGO advisers. I estimated that there are about 80 people observing, mostly villagers from the protest, but I also recognised some journalists, NGO and student activists among them.

Adisorn Plianket arrived forty minutes late to chair the meeting. Adisorn was the New Aspiration Party MP from Khon Kaen, and Deputy Minister for Science. Adisorn was a charming and witty speaker, often cracking jokes. He was also a native of Khon Kaen and sometimes broke into Lao. Adisorn of course controlled and dominated the proceedings, sitting at the head of the room with his secretary. He expressed sympathy for the plight and hardship of his "brothers and sisters, the people" camped out in the heat at Government House.

Adisorn began by emphasising that there was one key issue, "what have been the effects of construction of the Pak Mun Dam on the fishing livelihoods of our brothers and sisters, the people?". He instructed the two sides of the room not to regard each other as enemies. He then asked if the Director of the Fisheries Department had attended as requested. The Director had chaired earlier negotiations over compensation for the three year dam construction period and Adisorn regarded him as a crucial participant in these negotiations. Once again he was absent and had delegated a lower official.

Officials from EGAT and the Fisheries Department made the first submissions to the meeting, and while they contradicted each other they also both rejected the basis of the villagers' petition. Indeed, it was 15 minutes before any villagers' delegate got a chance to speak and by then they were already on the defensive. The EGAT official began by rephrasing the issue. "Have fish resources in the river declined or not? If there has been a decline, is the dam the direct cause? But, we can't really answer these questions." He argued that population growth and increased exploitation of fish also contributed to declining numbers of fish in the river, and therefore there were many causes. Finally, he

called for a committee of technical experts (*nak-wichakan*) to be established to find “correct information”. The Fisheries Department delegate then spoke up and claimed that, according to their own expert who oversees the fish ladder and fisheries development in the dam, there were now three times the quantity of fish in the river than before the dam was built!

The first Assembly representative to speak was Pen, an activist from the Project for Ecological Recovery who has worked with the Mun River villagers for several years. Villagers and activists argue strongly that villagers must “speak for themselves” in public forums and negotiations, as no one else really has legitimacy to do so. On several occasions after some of the early rounds of negotiation meetings during the protest I heard villagers complaining that their own delegates said too little and left the NGO advisers to speak for them. During the Pak Mun Dam negotiations these issues and tensions surrounding who should speak for local people were also played out, both inside and outside the official meeting rooms. The education and work experience of NGO activists such as Pen and Maliwan gave them language skills and a grasp of technical language and argument that most of the villagers had not had a chance to acquire. But at an even more basic level, the activists spoke polite Thai fluently, whereas this was a second language for the villagers from the Northeast, who chose to speak Lao.

What emerged during this round of negotiations was a fuzzy division of labour between activists and villagers. Villagers’ delegates largely spoke in terms of their personal experience and gave accounts of the dam’s effects on their lives and livelihoods. They asserted they knew from first hand experience, as well as anyone, the effects of the dam on the river. Activists, on the other hand, tried to present arguments to ‘frame’ the villagers’ testimony and support its legitimacy and validity.

This can be seen clearly in the way Pen entered the debate that day. First, she called on EGAT to table its earlier report about the period of dam construction. She reminded them that this report was approved by EGAT and showed clearly that the three year construction period had a direct effect on fishing and local fishers’ livelihoods. “Surely we can relate these findings to the present problems.” She then moved to introduce the villagers’ delegates and their own first hand evidence. “Now, people who are fishers have

come to present data (*Kho mun*) that they have gathered themselves about what has happened. About how their own incomes from the river have declined. So they seek compensation. I think that we should give this data appropriate importance also.”

At this, Siang introduced himself and asserted that the “local owners of the river” have their own committee to find solutions to the problem and the government should accept their information and evidence. He invoked Thailand’s international image, a common theme in the media, claiming that, “If the government does not accept our petition it will damage the image (*sia phap-phot*) of the government and the nation.” Finally, he asked what will happen to the people rallying at Government House if they have to wait for a committee of experts to present their findings.

The other villagers’ delegates presented their cases as the opportunity arose during the following couple of hours. They rejected the government’s move to constitute yet another committee of experts, which would effectively exclude them from the process and delay any compensation agreement. Wari, a young man, stood and addressed the meeting about fishing livelihoods before the dam. “I am one person who has suffered the effects of the Pak Mun Dam,” he began in Thai, but then switched to Lao with Thai politeness markers (*khrap*). “We maintain that there are no fish. We have already proved it, Mr Chair. You don’t have to take experts there to prove it. We have proved that with the dam we are not able to use our fishing equipment. For example, using the *thum* (net) in various places we used to be able to catch enough fish to sell for four to five thousand baht.”

Adisorn interrupted him, asking “What month was that?”

“May,” Wari replied. “But after the dam fishers are not able to catch large valuable fish like they used to.”

Jun, an elder villager, supported his testimony. “Before the dam I could fish the rapids and catch five or six kilograms of fish a day, which sold for 120 baht per kilogram. Now, when we go fishing, we can’t even get one kilogram of small fish.” Then an older woman, who had been sitting on the floor at the back of the room among the group of spectators, stood resolutely and called out a challenge to Adisorn. “Why set up a

committee of experts?" she declared, "Why don't we go together and see what fish you can catch now?"

In the midst of the negotiations another government member of parliament dropped in and proposed a solution that surprised even the government technocrats. Mana Khusakul, a New Aspiration Party MP from the Northeast, introduced himself as an "ordinary person from the countryside" and spoke about his younger days in his home village fishing. He proposed that EGAT study the possibility of shutting down electricity production and opening the dam during the season when fish migrate up the river from the Mekong to lay their eggs, and only closing the floodgates and generating power for the rest of the year.

EGAT and Fisheries officials continued to reject, or simply ignore, the villagers' claims. EGAT showed a promotional video about their fish breeding program and the fish ladder that was added to the dam in 1995. The Fisheries Department official reported that, "We have data that in 1991 the total fishing income of the population for the three districts of Khong Jiam, Phibun and Sirinthorn was about 3 million baht in value. At the present time, during the period from May 1995 to May 1996 we calculate that the value of fish caught was about 5 million baht."

Then, an Irrigation Department official complained that "every time the state builds something people always complain to the government, or EGAT, or us." He declared, "First, we should consider whether this group of people have a right to petition or not. If you accept that they do, then second, is their petition plausible?"

Adisorn was not impressed. "Here in Thailand everyone has the right to petition" he replied. "It's part of our democratic system. You probably shouldn't ask such questions. People have a right to petition directly to the government, because I'm well aware that district officials cover things up, or even EGAT covers things up."

Maliwan tried to turn the discussion back to the issue of expert knowledge and gave a sophisticated and succinct summary of the NGO's perspective. "Large fish provided the livelihood for local villagers before dam construction. You have spoken about experts

and data. We have expertise and data here. This is research,” she said, holding up a slim report prepared by the activists and Mun River fishers. “Interviews with villagers about their incomes, livelihood and amounts of fish caught in 1995 and 1996 compared with before dam construction. Here we have data. But whose information should we believe? Before dam construction Thailand never saw the gathering of data or research on the amount of livelihoods, catches or incomes of local people who made their livelihood in the area from fishing. We must accept this point. The fish ladder has just been built after the dam was already constructed. There should be information about what the fisheries were like before the dam so we can make comparisons and assess who is right and wrong. The people who know well, those who remember, should be the experts. I know it’s not the technical experts for certain, because they didn’t go there then. But the local fishers there caught and ate the fish continuously. So who will you believe, the experts from which side?”

Siang followed Maliwan with an passionate appeal. “EGAT must compensate for what has been lost and destroyed by the dam. Just as EGAT must compensate for land flooded, so it must compensate for the fisheries destroyed!”

By now it was almost six o’clock. Adisorn wanted to bring the meeting to a close. There had been no progress as the officials had not accepted the villagers’ evidence that the dam had destroyed the river’s fisheries. The villagers could not move negotiations on to bargaining over appropriate compensation before this basic claim was agreed upon. Adisorn began to sum up: “Personally I think that the dam has certainly had an effect. But in terms of what percentage has been caused by the dam, we have to rely on Fishery Department experts. You might believe them, you might not believe them. We should get the two sides together again.” Adisorn proposed, therefore, to establish a committee of experts to investigate scientifically the effect of the dam on the fish. He postponed the next meeting and insisted that the Fisheries Director must attend the negotiations or give a written response to Adisorn’s questions.

The villagers and I walked back to the protest site through streets awash with six inches of water. It had been raining for several hours. At the rally site protesters had piled up their belongings to keep them dry. Many stood as there was nowhere dry to sit or lie. On

stage a young man sang “music for life” songs to try to cheer everyone up.

School of Politics: Transforming Political Consciousness

The activists who work with the Assembly of the Poor believe that the consciousness of villagers who join in collective action and protest is transformed in the very process of struggle. In the Mun River Declaration Assembly advisers write about the “Consciousness of the Poor” (*samneuk khon jon*) in this way:

Poor people, no matter where they live, tend to be poor because they’re oppressed and exploited, whether in terms of political economy, society, or culture, and this is a truth which may not be denied. For this reason, the way out for the poor is to throw off and escape from that oppression and exploitation. Therefore it is necessary to depend on their own strength to change, and to come together to stand shoulder to shoulder all together. To create a situation like this poor people must struggle with themselves to win out over their own fear, build confidence and determination in themselves. They must bring their strength together tightly to build their bargaining power to have their just share of resources (Assembly of the Poor, 1995).

Similarly, a recent book by academics and NGO activists in the Northeast argues that protest action “makes villagers’ leaders bold and outspoken, and gives them courage to negotiate and bargain with officials right up to the level of cabinet ministers and the prime minister. It makes its members learn and understand the culture of thought and action of people in authority” (Somphan Techa-athik et al., 1997:77).

Samran, an NGO activist who works most closely with the Northeast Farmers Assembly for Protection of Land Rights explained it to me in terms of his own personal experience. In understanding collective protest, he argued, “You have to look at past situations. You have to look at the historical background of the villagers. What have Isan villagers been like? Very passive.” Samran referred to the mass protest by Isan villagers against the *Kho Jo Ko* forest resettlement scheme in 1992 (see Chapter 2). Over 10,000 protesters gathered next to the main highway from the Northeast to Bangkok.

That first day the villagers decided that they wanted to close the road, but at first they didn’t dare. They said that we should exert pressure first, negotiate first. We [NGO advisers] said we must take some action. But they didn’t dare go out on the road, they were slow to act. We had them distribute information (pamphlets) to buses, and go onto the road in dribs and drabs. The vehicles had to slow down. Then their leaders called upon everyone to sit down and that did it. The second day, everything

happened. When they said close the road, they did... And after that many NGO workers believed that this way made the villagers 'smart', made them feel confident, capable and determined. They see their own 'potential.' They feel they are equal to the governor, equal to cabinet ministers, because this power of collective protest is very clear... If you give training, some sort of education, I don't know if you will get the same results. Maybe you would. But I think, up to now, this method of protest has been the best, it's useful. *Pho* [Siang] can talk with cabinet ministers, it's become ordinary (Interview, Samran, Khon Kaen, 21-8-97).

Processes of developing or transforming political consciousness are complex and difficult to study. Nevertheless, I think that the concept of political consciousness is very useful in addressing some of the social processes of the protest rally and the way participants changed as a result. Several protesters explained to me that the rally was a learning experience for them; they were "learning about politics!". For example, two days before the Sanam Luang rally I sat chatting with Kan at his makeshift coffee stall when a young man joined us. Thong, in his mid-twenties, came from Sakaew Province in eastern Thailand. His wife had remained at their home with their two young children. After I had introduced myself and explained that I was a postgraduate student, he said he was also a student, "a student of politics!". With an ironic smile he told me he was studying politics right here in the rally. His own group had joined the protest to petition for land rights documents as they faced eviction from their homes and farms. He told me that each day he circulated throughout the rally site talking to different groups of villagers about their grievances. He felt that the different problems of each group were very similar, and arose because bureaucrats deceive and overpower (*khrop ngum*) the villagers. Thong spoke of government officials and local influential people (*jao-pho*, suggesting involvement in criminal activities) blocking people from petitioning for justice or participating in protests.

A week after the rally began, Assembly advisers announced that they were about to open a "School of Politics" (*rorng-rian kan-muang*) and invited all interested members to attend. Khun Wiset, from the NGO Friends of the People, managed the schools' curriculum and activities. About 220 protesters attended, meeting several afternoons a week in the grounds of Benjamabophit Temple. Wiset and other Assembly advisers taught the classes, but at their invitation many university lecturers and prominent activists

made contributions and gave guest lectures. These included academics from Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities, labour union leaders and democracy activists, and well-known social critic Sulak Srivarak. “Students” of the school also went on several “field trips” to participate in seminars at universities and institutes around Bangkok. For example, they were invited to participate in a seminar on “The Direction of the New Constitution” organised by the Constitution Drafting Committee at Thammasat University (Mongkol, 1997). They visited and presented submissions to the United Nations at their Bangkok headquarters.

Phet, a *pho khrua yai* from the Dong Lan forest community in Khon Kaen province, became a student in the school:

Anyone who wanted could join the political school, as we wanted to have our brothers and sisters gain a greater understanding of politics, as we had already experienced lessons from politics, and suffered ill effects from politics. So we wanted to learn more about politics in order to be a basis in addressing our problems, and protection for ourselves. At first we used Wat Benjamabophit temple grounds for our lessons and studies in the evenings. Often we were invited to join meetings in other places, such as Ban Manangkhasila or the Pridi Institute. We studied with lawyers. University lecturers would take turns teaching, but mainly we studied the basis of politics, learned about the structure of the Thai political system. We studied the evolution and rise and fall of Thai democracy (Interview, Phet, 8-9-1997, Tambon Dong Lan).

A central aspect of the political school’s activities was the preparation of the Assembly’s submission to the national Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA), which was then in the process of preparing a new national constitution. As Phet explained, this led them to focus on applied knowledge.

We studied to develop ideas and knowledge to use in drafting the Constitution of the Poor. We went and got information from outside, but also from among ourselves, the villagers. Each villager drew on the problems of their particular group and assessed this in order to draft laws and principles for the constitution that could protect against such problems arising again. [In general] we wanted them [CDA] to acknowledge poor people (*yorm-rap khon jon*). Those words ‘acknowledge poor people’ mean ensure constitutional rights equal with every level of society (Interview, Phet, 8-9-1997, Tambon Dong Lan).

On 26 March the Assembly officially released their constitutional submission which had been written by the School of Politics students with the help of activists and academics

(Assembly of the Poor, 1997c). In a media relations coup the CDA President, Uthai Pimchaichon, and former prime minister and Charter Writing Committee Chair, Anand Panyarachun, visited the rally to officially accept their submission on behalf of the CDA (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 26-3-1997).⁹ The Assembly's submission included proposals for the decentralisation of administrative power and the rights of communities to manage local resources, legal guarantees of compensation for land and resources destroyed by state development projects, freedom of information from state bureaucracies, and the establishment of an independent constitutional court.

Conclusion

When the marathon rally in the heat and dust of Bangkok concluded, it seemed that the Assembly had achieved a great deal for its members. Chavalit's government pledged in the strongest terms to consider and address all of the grievances on which the Assembly petitioned, some state projects were cancelled, compensation for local people adversely affected by big dams and big development projects was guaranteed. Committees with government, bureaucratic and Assembly representatives were established to follow up on agreements reached during the protest. But when the Chavalit coalition fell apart in November 1997 all of these committees dissolved also and the process ground to a halt once again.

Nevertheless, the protest was an extraordinary event in the history of collective political action by rural and urban poor in Thailand. As I examine throughout this thesis, the Assembly employs a wide range of strategies and tactics in making its claims against the government and particular state actors, but while protest should be seen in the context of this broad repertoire of action it remains the fundamental method of conferring power to those claims. The demonstration represented one of the most sustained and well-organised mass protests ever mounted in Bangkok. It won considerable coverage and support in the mass media, which was clearly a crucial mediator in the conflict, generally

⁹ Anand, in a speech from the stage, said that as a former prime minister he was partly responsible for the problems which had brought the protesters to Bangkok. He said that the new constitution would not get rid of poverty, but would create better conditions for addressing poverty and problems caused by development (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 26-3-1997).

according legitimacy to the Assembly as a political actor and widely disseminating its petition in the public sphere. The government and high ranking public officials were forced to acknowledge the Assembly's claims and negotiate with some of the poorest and most marginalised people in Thai society (see Photograph 14).

In this chapter I have presented a detailed ethnographic account of the protest grounded in first-hand participant observation and the words, actions and experiences of Assembly members. This ethnographic approach has led to a view of protest that differs from the more usual studies in the social movements literature that rely heavily on historical documentation or media reports. It has opened up new ways of studying the meanings and social processes through which protest is constructed. In this concluding section I will reiterate three main arguments that have informed my analysis of protest and that relate to my overall question about power and social change.

First, although I have dealt with the 1997 protest rally as a distinct 'event' in the history of the Assembly of the Poor, the protest actually stems from the whole range of social and cultural processes explored in earlier chapters of this thesis. It needs to be understood in terms of all of the complex problems of organising at the local level, social networking and alliance building, identity formation and representation, and mobilisation of resources, including cultural resources and information. Thus, early in this account I emphasised the links between local communities and the rally at the central, national level. The grounding in local grievances motivated individuals to participate, while the flow of people and resources between the local and the centre proved crucial in sustaining such a long protest. But at the same time, as I discuss in Chapter 2, the Assembly had to find ways to unite the diverse local groups and express concrete, locally-grounded grievances in terms of a unifying, cohesive identity asserting the interests of the 'poor' against national development policy.

Second, the ethnographic approach underscores a view of protest in broader terms than simply its instrumental political goals of influencing government decision-making. The Assembly's rally created a new site - a new social context - for the articulation and negotiation of the *meanings of grievances*, as well as the *meanings* and *legitimacy* of the Assembly's *agency* and *political identity*. One dimension of this was the highly

expressive and theatrical character of the protest. Assembly members drew on their collective cultural resources to continually enact dramatic or spectacular performances not only to attract media attention but also to express the Assembly's grievances and ideological critiques in the public sphere. These performances and discourses generated within the rally represented a powerful critique of contemporary social inequality in Thai society and the impacts of "development" on the poor. The representation of the rally site as the "Village of the Poor" symbolically brought the rural village into the heart of the city and symbolised a community in crisis, the "victims of development". A second dimension of the discursive conflict was the struggle to give meaning to their own agency that would carry legitimacy in the public sphere. A prime example is the Assembly's struggle to counter the representation as a "mob". In describing the Assembly as a "mob" whose members were paid by some wealthy and powerful "third hand", or manipulated by foreign-funded NGOs, opponents effectively denied the agency of the movement and attacked its legitimacy as a political actor with a right to petition the state. This was one reason why NGO activists and Assembly leaders emphasised and made such a virtue of the highly ordered and non-violent nature of the rally as a organised community illustrating the collective agency of the poor.

Third, in focussing on the meanings that Assembly members ascribe to their own actions and experiences within the protest, I have tried to show how it provided a crucial experience in developing and transforming their political consciousness. As I wrote in the Introduction, political consciousness here refers to William's (1977) concept of practical consciousness, to the subjective experience and knowledge of actors, the meanings they give to their social position, and the ways in which they understand their political interests and the purposes of collective action. Political consciousness, in this view, is shaped by hegemony and determines how people see themselves as political subjects, that is, whether they identify themselves with a collective agency. In this regard I have discussed the great amount of work that Assembly members actually put into addressing each other, engendering a culture of solidarity and community, asserting the agency and power of the poor as a collective force, and constructing and negotiating their sense of collective identity. While many, if not most, individuals may have been principally motivated by the prospect of personal material benefits (financial compensation, protecting a home or livelihood) their participation exposed them to these discourses,

brought direct experience of the power of collective action and an *identification* with a collective agency with a project for social change. Furthermore, their political identity and agency was acknowledged and given legitimacy by sections of the media, sections of the state (including the BMA), representative institutions close to the state such as the CDA, as well as a number civil organisations. Participants learned through experience that “Solidarity is strength” and saw their own political agency in action. If the experience expanded the protesters’ horizons of struggle and engendered a growing confidence in their collective ability to make their own history, this was a step towards social change.

Photograph 7. The entrance to “Village of the Frog” on 27 Nov. 2011. Protesters made caricature demands mocking Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai’s Yangbhaiyadhi for his failure to respond to their demands.

Photograph 8. Inside the “Village of the Frog” protest site.



Photograph 7. The entrance to “Village of the Poor No. 2”. Protesters made caricature dummies mocking Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh for his failure to respond to their demands.



Photograph 8. Inside the “Village of the Poor” protest site.



Photographs 9 & 10. 16 March 1997. The Assembly marches to a rally at Sanam Luang park in a display of strength and a demonstration of support from allied organisations. At the head of the procession protesters carry Thai national flags and pictures of the King.





Photograph 11. Preparing for the march outside Benjamabophit Temple. Protesters carried flags, banners and models. The banner in the foreground depicts dams as monsters devouring the countryside. Behind it is a model of a cityscape being sustained by a dam wall – but behind the dam wall a flood drowns rural villages.



Photograph 12. The crowd and stage at the Sanam Luang rally.



Photograph 13. The symbolic boxing match between the Assembly and Prime Minister Chavalit to mark two months of protest. 25 March 1997.



Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh meets Forum of the Poor representatives at Government House yesterday. — APICHART JINAKUL

RASI SALAI

PM pledges dam compensation

Photograph 14. Outcomes. Assembly delegates meet with Prime Minister Chavalit and government representatives in October 1997 to follow up promises made during the protest (from *Bangkok Post*, 3 October 1997).

7 **Democratising Civil Society?** **Grassroots Democracy and Power** **within The Assembly**

Don Chai Village clings to a hillside overlooking the Yom River valley in the northern province of Phrae. Near the village lies a patchwork of young tamarind orchards, and beyond those, re-growth teak forests stretch up to the ridges. Below, the Yom River, still just a shallow stream, flows through a narrow flood plain with little room for rice fields. I arrived in Ban Don Chai at dusk on a Friday evening in October 1997 after travelling all day from Khon Kaen. I had come for the regular meeting of the *pho khrua yai* - the collective leadership of the Assembly of the Poor - which gathered together every three months after the Assembly concluded their extended protest in Bangkok. This time they were meeting here in Ban Don Chai, the centre of local villagers' opposition to the Kaeng Seua Ten Dam. I walked through the village to the temple grounds where the meeting would be held over the following two days. In the 'main street' villagers houses and shop fronts were adorned with hand-painted signs and banners declaring their opposition to the dam. "The forest gives life. Stop and think. Stop the destruction." A bright red banner on the house of the *kamnan* proclaimed, "Preserve the golden teak forest. Cancel Kaeng Seua Ten Dam".

For over two hundred years successive generations of Don Chai villagers have made their living from the local teak forests. They worked for the concession companies cutting and hauling timber, often illegally and outside of concession areas. Those who owned elephants could make a lot of money. In 1981 the national government announced its intention to build a large dam on the Kaeng Seua Ten rapids of the Yom River downstream from Don Chai. After that logging intensified as companies took out timber concessions in the catchment of the proposed dam. By the late 1980s, after watching the forests being plundered by outsiders, Don Chai villagers began cutting golden teak to use in their own community, "because if we didn't take the timber, others would take it all!". They built a large, impressive monks' residence in the temple grounds. Most of the village's four hundred families built themselves a new house, hewn

out of golden teak from the nearby forests. This meant more than just an investment in a new house for each family; the valuable teak could be sold in the future for considerable profit.

Organised, local opposition to the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam began in 1989 when the Chatichai government approved the project and Don Chai villagers first learned that their homes would be flooded. As they began to understand the connections between the dam proposal and the accelerated logging and destruction of their local forests, they realised that their best strategy was conservation, not collaboration in the logging. The government had declared most of the area a national park in 1986. The villagers have no land title documents to use as a basis for opposition or claims for compensation. So, the whole village turned to growing sweet tamarind and a range of cash crops such as corn and beans, and became advocates for conservation of the remaining stands of teak and sustainable “community forestry”. In this way the villagers repositioned themselves as environmentalists in the struggle to retain their land. Although the villagers have turned towards conservation, illegal logging continued, with, according to local people, the complicity of local police.¹⁰

The temple grounds commanded the highest point in the village. Volunteer guards from the village hung around the entrance to the fenced compound but said nothing as I entered. Just inside to the left stood the temple hall (*sala wat*). To the right was the large monks’ residence, which also housed a large kitchen. Women bustled in and out of the kitchen, preparing and serving the evening meal on tables set up for the purpose. About a hundred or more participants had already arrived. They continued arriving in small groups through the whole night, having travelled in NGO vehicles, rented pickups or on public transport from all corners of Thailand. Ban Don Chai accommodated them in the temple hall and in the classrooms of the village primary school next door. Many of the NGO activists, and myself, stayed with families throughout the village. The Mun River Villagers’ Centre pickup arrived early in the morning before dawn, having driven all

¹⁰ This brief history of Ban Don Chai is based on interviews and discussions with Prasit, a leader of the local villagers’ organisation opposing the dam, Susithorn, in whose house I stayed, Prakop, a member of the local Tambon council, and several other residents of Don Chai who came to observe the Assembly’s

night from Khong Jiam. It came loaded with villagers' representatives from the different villagers' organisations in Ubon and two NGO activists from the Centre. Daeng and another woman, Yim, came to represent the Mun River Villagers' Organisation.

By early Saturday morning about 240 community representatives had arrived to attend the *pho khrua yai* meeting. About eighteen NGO activists attended, assisted by a similar number of student activists. Don Chai village women served breakfast: big steaming pots of rice, curry and vegetables laid out on tables next to the temple kitchen. Our hosts had erected several tarpaulins near the temple hall and arranged extra tables and dozens of folding chairs under these. A PA system with two stacks of speakers stood at one end of the temple hall. A large contingent of Don Chai villagers (some 60 to 70 people) came to listen and observe. The handful of monks then in residence kept to the background, but often observed the proceedings quietly from the steps of their quarters.

While we finished our breakfast downstairs, the NGO advisors met by themselves upstairs on the balcony of the monks' quarters. I chatted with a young reporter for the television program "Face the Environment" on iTV (Channel 5), who had come to prepare a special program on the Assembly of the Poor. While we talked another TV crew interviewed Maliwan in the temple hall.

The meeting got off to a late start as we waited for the arrival of the District Officer, whom the host villagers had invited to officially open the proceedings. When he finally arrived, forty minutes late, the formalities began with a prayer and offering to the Buddha image at the head of the hall. Sawang, an NGO activist, welcomed the District Officer and invited him to open the meeting. The District Officer proclaimed that when the Assembly of the Poor notified him of their planned meeting here in Don Chai Village he was surprised and did not understand why they would choose this location. The proposed Kaeng Seua Ten dam was a matter for the government and the people of this province. He seemed reluctant to be there at all, but remained polite and performed the brief formalities that had been requested.

meeting, during a four day visit to the village from 17 to 20-10-1997.

This was a long way from the excitement and direct action of the mass protest in Bangkok, but as I demonstrate here, the collective actions and struggles for social change by the Assembly of the Poor must be seen as much broader and more complex than just mobilising large numbers of people for high-profile public demonstrations. As part of its struggles for participation and democratic reform the Assembly has sought to enact new forms of democratic organisation and collective decision-making within the movement. These processes of grassroots democracy are seen as part of a broader project of democratising and ‘strengthening civil society’.

In this chapter I describe and analyse some of the social spaces and social networks through which the Assembly of the Poor is constructing and democratising a grassroots “civil society.” I focus on the forms and processes of association, organisation and “grassroots democracy” which have emerged in the Assembly. The movement has sought new ways of building cooperative and collective action. Power and decision-making are negotiated and distributed through decentralised networks. But within these complex networks, in which villagers, NGO activists and academics occupy different positions, there are imbalances of power and conflicts over power and resources.

In order to explore these issues I present a series of ethnographic accounts of meetings and social situations where these processes of participation, negotiation, and collective decision-making are enacted. I describe in some detail the *pho khrua yai* meeting in Ban Don Chai, as well as local level meetings and decision-making processes within villagers' organisations and individual villages. I try to show how these are linked and interrelated. This allows me to go beyond the public rhetoric and official accounts of the Assembly – which speak of grassroots democracy and collective leadership – to look at actual social processes in specific contexts and situations. In this study I do not invoke preset, theoretical definitions of “democracy” or “participation”. Such concepts are after all widely contested and used in a huge variety of ways (Green, 1993). In this chapter I am more concerned with describing how the meanings and practices of “democracy” are actually socially constructed and collectively negotiated by people in real social contexts.

Social Movements as Struggles to Democratise Civil Society and Everyday Life

As I argued in the introduction, studies of contemporary social movements have challenged our conceptions of the social domains and targets of political struggle, and the ways in which power and inequality might be contested and transformed. Most social movements address the state in some way or another, but also struggle to effect changes in a range of social relations and institutions outside the state (that is, civil society). A wide range of social relationships, institutions, ideologies and cultural practices, from the family and position of women, to economic consumption and ecologically sustainable ways of life, have become sites of social conflict and targets of reform for collective action. As Cohen and Arato argue, we must "view civil society as the target as well as the terrain" of contemporary social movements:

Contemporary collective actors consciously struggle over the power to construct new identities, to create democratic spaces within both civil society and the polity for autonomous social action, and to reinterpret norms and reshape institutions (Cohen & Arato, 1992:509).

To put it another way, relations of power, exploitation and inequality penetrate and structure virtually all relations and domains of society. Thus the varied forms of collective action that have emerged to oppose different forms of power and inequality necessarily engage in the struggle in a whole range of social domains in order to bring about change in society. Political activity means more than contending with the state or engaging in electoral politics. The point is that it is now widely recognised that the social impact and transformative potential of contemporary social movements may lie with their collective action and struggles on a range of social, cultural and political fronts, in the realms of everyday life and civil society, as well as the state.

Closely linked with the widened view of political activity extending into civil society and everyday life, is the assertion that contemporary social movements are characterised by grassroots or participatory democracy. Touraine (quoted in Cohen & Arato, 1992:519) sees contemporary social movements as engaged in a "struggle to extend the field of political activity and to democratize new and existing public spaces at the expense of state control and the technocratic model of society". Indeed, appeals to democracy and participation have been used to oppose forms of domination and the exercise of power, such as bureaucratic power and patriarchy, in all levels of society down to the family

(Boggs, 1995; Green, 1993). The argument is that social movements challenge and extend the very notion and discourse of democracy while struggling to democratise collective life outside of the institutionalised forms of electoral politics; that is, social movements endeavour to democratise domains within civil society. Frank and Fuentes (1990, quoted in Robert Fisher, 1993:17) argue that contemporary social movements “are the most important agents of social transformation in that their praxis promotes participatory democracy in civil society”.

Movements in ‘Third World’ developing countries as well as industrialised countries have been interpreted in this light. Fisher (1998), among others, links grassroots democratisation with the process of 'empowerment'. She argues that by democratic self-management, NGOs enhance their organisational autonomy and their power to influence the state.

The Assembly of the Poor as a Struggle for Participation and Democracy

The Assembly’s democratic and participatory ideology (see Chapter 3) is deeply interwoven with the movement’s efforts to promote and enact democratic and cooperative forms of self-management and collective action inside their organisations and networks. In other words, paralleling their critique of centralisation of power and administration of development through the hierarchical, inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, the Assembly has tried to establish non-hierarchical and decentralised forms of organisation and decision-making which enable ‘direct democracy’ and collective leadership. These links between ideological critique and political reform are most clearly expressed by some of the NGO and academic advisers who work closely with the Assembly:

It has been learned particularly from the case of Thailand that parliamentary democracy is also much of an illusion at times. Grassroots work and networking is the core of counterbalancing forces. The task is therefore to get the grassroots strong and build up people-to-people relationships at all levels - international, national and local... Democracy and people's empowerment are still the key to counterbalance wrongdoings in the current development style (Bantorn et.al., 1994:122-123)

Today we cherish the values of participation and strive to replace representative democracy with decentralised participatory communities and institutions (Bantorn et.al., 1994:145).

Similarly, Det Phumkhacha from the Thai Volunteer Service writes that many NGO workers “see the networking of people’s organisations as the groundwork for grassroots democratization. NGOs believe that effective promotion of democracy needs to be done at both grassroots and upper levels” (Thai Development Support Committee, 1995:29).

Clearly the idea of “civil society” as a social domain for the emergence of counterbalancing forces for reform is at work here. Civil society is seen as a social domain where people come together in associations and organisations that are autonomous and independent from the power of the state, often to oppose or challenge the power of the state. The idea of civil society has become a key focus of democracy and NGO activists in Thailand as a target for democratising society. That is, many NGO activists regard working with villagers and urban poor people, encouraging and helping them to organise collectively and cooperatively, promoting a political culture and practice of participatory and direct democracy at the grassroots level, as effective strategies for addressing poverty, economic exploitation, and building political and economic power among grassroots actors. Not all democracy activists and NGO organisers label this idea of developing organisational capacities at the “grassroots” “civil society”, and indeed the meaning of “civil society” is highly contested and interpreted in many different ways. But as the quotes above demonstrate, they are clearly aiming to develop forms of association, participatory democracy and collective action as social domains countervailing the power and domination of an authoritarian, bureaucratic and elitist state.

In this view civil society becomes the domain for transforming the political culture of “the people” and “the poor”. In other words, putting “grassroots democracy” into practice is as much about transforming local people’s political culture as it is about challenging and contesting domination and the centralisation of power that continues under the guise of representative democracy. Cooperative and democratic forms of organisation do not necessarily emerge “naturally” or spontaneously from groups of villagers or slum dwellers. And the community organisations which constitute the Assembly emerged and developed in the face of pervasive state bureaucratic structures that extend right down into the village and cultivate and promote a culture of

bureaucratic paternalism and deference to government officials.

Civil society is not just a social domain from which organised opposition to state power and struggles to change society are mounted, but is necessarily a domain of struggle and conflict itself. Civil society is the target of state hegemony and the site of conflicts over ideological control and legitimacy. The attempts by the Assembly of the Poor to enact processes of collective leadership and “grassroots democracy” are part of a struggle over political culture. Enacting collective leadership and a form of grassroots democracy that overtly gives power to local community representatives, no matter how flawed or riven with internal power differentials, represents a challenge and opposition to the dominant political culture and paternalism promoted by state officials.

The Assembly’s concept and representation of itself as a “forum” is one way that they have tried to conceptualise and create a democratic movement. As I have mentioned earlier, the Assembly uses various words to express this, including *samatcha*, *wethi* (stage), and the English word “forum”. All of these terms suggests a process in which participants come together as equals in a spirit of mutual cooperation and exchange. As they stated in one of their publicity leaflets the Assembly of the Poor “holds the objective to be a forum (*wethi*) acquiring power through cooperation, sharing experience, and coordination of mutual assistance” (Assembly of the Poor, 1997h). The choice of “forum” or “assembly” also encompasses the fact that the Assembly of the Poor is not a single cohesive organisation but rather a network of villagers’ organisations, slum community organisations and supporting NGOs, which retain their autonomy and independence (see Chapter 3). The challenge for the Assembly has been, then, how to coordinate and lead the network while sustaining the principles of equality, participation and democracy.

Collective Leadership and Internal Democracy

The organizational structure of the Assembly of the Poor has the characteristics of a network whose internal relations have a culture of equality (*watthanatham baeb samoe na*). Decision-making power resides with representatives from each community who meet together in *pho khrua yai* meetings in a forum enabling collective leadership (Praphat, 1997b:40).

Authority to decide the activities and progress of the Assembly of the Poor rests with meetings of community representatives called *pho khrua yai*. *Pho khrua yai* can be translated as “head chef”. *Pho* means “father” but both men and women occupy positions of *pho khrua yai*. At the meetings that I attended in 1996 and 1997 approximately one third of the *pho khrua yai* delegates were women. However, the gendering of the term reinforces an expectation of masculine qualities of leadership in public affairs. Moreover, during the Sanam Luang rally, speakers from the stage referred to *mae khrua yai* as the group who looked after health and sanitation in the rally. This, of course, further entrenched the subordination of feminine qualities in service and domestic roles. Assembly representatives explained that *pho khrua yai* are the “principle representatives from each problem group” (Fieldnotes, Bangkok, 16-3-1997). Each local community chooses one or more representatives to attend the *Pho khrua yai* meetings, depending on the size of their group. As I mentioned in Chapter 3 they number around 260 delegates (Fieldnotes 16-3-1997, Assembly of the Poor, 1997j).

Pho khrua yai meetings represent an attempt to find non-hierarchical ways of leading and managing the movement through a process of “collective leadership”. By having each local “problem group” represented by at least one person, the leadership is directly linked with the local villagers which constitute the rank and file. Moreover, through the *pho khrua yai* meetings the Assembly carries on a self-reflective critical debate within the network about its own methods, political strategies and goals. *Pho khrua yai* are also responsible for reporting back to their local group about Assembly decisions. They tend to be members of their local communities more experienced in leadership and campaigning and lobbying. The establishment of this structure and process of collective leadership grew at least partly out of dissatisfaction with the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast, an important precursor to the Assembly of the Poor (Praphat, 1997b:11, see also Chapter 2 on historical background).

Suthy Prasartset (1997:3) maintains that the *pho khrua yai* meetings represent “a truly democratic system of internal management”. He points out that the Assembly “rejects appointing official positions such as chairperson or secretary” and admires the non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic principles implicit in this. Similarly, Praphat (1997a:54;

1998) argues that the *pho khrua yai* leadership reveals a “culture of equality” operating in the Assembly.

In the two months prior to the 1997 rally in Bangkok, *pho khrua yai* assembled twice to consider the progress of negotiations with the government and consider protest action, once in Khong Jiam on 14-15 December 1996, and again in early January 1997 to prepare for their scheduled meeting with the Prime Minister in mid-January. During the protest rally *pho khrua yai* met briefly at least once, often twice, each day. In the mornings they often gathered inside the entrance to the nearby Nang Loeng Park racing track. In the evenings they would usually meet in the grounds of Benjamaborphit Temple at the northern end of the rally site. They discussed the progress of negotiations, the morale and day to day problems of the protesters, planned publicity stunts for the media and reviewed the organisation and welfare of the rally site. These meetings were driven by the daily demands of maintaining the rally, the slow, halting progress of negotiations with the government and the constant need to devise and organise attention-grabbing stunts and events for the media. They kept the meetings short, about an hour in the morning, from one to two hours in the evening, because of the other demands on their time. Most *pho khrua yai* also acted on the negotiating team for their group, preparing and presenting their community’s case to the government. The last day of the rally, when the Prime Minister met with the *pho khrua yai*, they invited the media to attend and observe the Assembly’s collective leadership in action.

After the mass demonstration concluded, *pho khrua yai* met every three months or so to review outcomes from the rally, progress of negotiations, and decide on continuing strategies. The first of these meetings was held at Wat Khiriket, a village an hours’ drive west of Chiang Mai in Hang Dong District, on 26-27 July 1997 (see Photograph 15). The second meeting took place in Ban Don Chai, Tambon Sa-iab at the proposed site of the Kaeng Seu Ten Dam in Phrae Province. The descriptions, analysis and discussion of the process of collective leadership enacted in the *pho khrua yai* meetings that I present here is based on several meetings that I attended, including the meetings at Khong Jiam, Chiang Mai and Phrae, as well as several held during the Bangkok rally.

The choice of locality and place is, of course, highly significant. The local villagers’

organisations in the Assembly take turns to host *pho khrua yai* meetings and accommodate and feed the participants. The location is, when practicable, chosen democratically in a previous *pho khrua yai* meeting. At the conclusion of the meeting at Wat Khiriket in July 1997, for example, several delegates proposed their home communities for the next assembly three months later. Prasit, Chair of the villagers' organisation opposing the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam, proposed his village, Ban Don Chai in Prae Province. He argued that the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam conflict had "reached boiling point" and an Assembly of the Poor meeting there would be a timely show of support for the anti-dam campaign, as influential people and factions in the current government were pushing for the construction project to go ahead. When a ballot was taken by show of hands the great majority supported his proposal (Fieldnotes, 27-7-1997, Wat Khiriket, Chiang Mai Province).

Thus, each meeting introduces representatives from widely dispersed villagers' organisations to the specific conditions and grievances of a member of the network. Time is set aside at the beginning of the meeting for the local hosts to explain their specific problems and the ongoing history of their campaigns, and "study tours" held at the conclusion. For instance, the meeting at Ban Don Chai began with the *kamnan* and Prasit, both of whom live in Don Chai, welcoming delegates and explaining some of the history of the proposed Kaeng Sua Ten dam and the reasons for local people's opposition to it. Then, on the morning of the third and last day before delegates left to return to their home communities, Prasit arranged vehicles to take them into a golden teak forest nearby which stands to be flooded if the dam goes ahead.

Every *pho khrua yai* meeting that I attended, outside of the occasional gatherings at the nearby racetrack during the protest, was held in the grounds of a village temple (*wat*). The village temple holds both pragmatic convenience and symbolic meaning as a choice of meeting place. The temple hall (*sala wat*) provides a convenient meeting hall large enough to accommodate three hundred or so participants (see Photograph 16). The temples could also provide sleeping quarters (the *sala* floor) and cooking, washing and toilet facilities for the visitors. Moreover, the temple grounds belong to the village community and lie outside of the official domains or control of the state in the village, while the temple hall commonly provides a venue for community meetings and gatherings, not just matters relating to worship. Thus, the temple represents an

unrestricted public space for meeting together where anyone could come to listen and observe the Assembly's meeting and business.

The daily meetings during the protest rally had very little structure. Time was too short; the meeting agenda was determined by day to day needs and problems, and government responses. The "regional" *pho khrua yai* meetings, on the other hand, offered two whole days for meetings, discussions and collective decision-making. These meetings were structured and organised. The NGO activists chaired the formal proceedings, set the meeting agendas and guided the discussion process. Each of the regional meetings that I attended followed a similar, well-worn structure and used the same discussion-generating strategies that seemed to derive from the activists' community development background and training. The first day consists almost entirely of information sharing and largely redundant reviewing of the situation of each of the groups in the Assembly. The second day focuses on future directions and collective campaign methods. Discussions about new strategies always came on the second day of proceedings and were clearly intended to grow out of the previous day's deliberations. And on both days they apply the same process of separating into smaller problem groups for discussion before returning to the large group.

At some of the meetings an invited government representative officially opened the meeting. At Wat Khiriket, the Deputy Minister for Agriculture (in the then cabinet of Prime Minister Chavalit) paid a brief visit from Chiang Mai city to officially open the proceedings. He accepted petition letters from Assembly delegates, made some brief comments, promising that the Chavalit government was doing its best to address the Assembly's grievances, held a quick press conference for the media reporters present, and left with his entourage. At Ban Don Chai the Assembly invited the local District Officer.

So, how do the representatives of local villagers' organisations claim a voice and negotiate their particular interests within the collective forums of *pho khrua yai*? What happens when one group tries to claim priority or gain the backing of the whole of the Assembly network for its singular campaign? The answer seems to be that the large number of local groups represented - 122 community groups - make decisive *leadership*

by the *pho khrua yai* almost impossible, except when the whole network moves together in mass demonstrations for which the collective social contract promises that every group stands to benefit. In other words, the *pho khrua yai* process works well at giving every community a voice, recognition and influence within the movement, but it cannot be the sole location of authority and decision-making for the Assembly, perhaps not even the major location. The *pho khrua yai* meetings are only the hubs in a network of communication, negotiation and compromise between the community organisations and the network as a whole. Even the NGO activists, who occupy positions of great power and influence, must negotiate and compromise. But do they represent forums of “grassroots democracy” where power and authority are vested in the villagers representatives? I will explore these questions by describing in greater detail one segment of a *Pho khrua yai* meeting and the processes of discussion, debate, negotiation and decision-making through which collective leadership was enacted.

Collective Leadership in Practice: The *Pho Khrua Yai* Meeting

I will focus on the second day of the *pho khrua yai* meeting in Ban Don Chai. The first day consisted almost entirely of information sharing. On this second day, however, the activists endeavoured to set a specific issue for the Assembly representatives to resolve collectively. The issue, as always, involved the future directions and strategies of the Assembly, in the context of a government that looked to be on the verge of collapse. Sawang, who works with slum organisations in Bangkok, chaired the session and set the agenda for discussion. He began by arguing that it would not be long before the current government dissolved and in light of this the Assembly needed to reconsider its short term priorities and strategies.

Sawang: First, Brothers and sisters (*phi nong*) we have to work out our priorities. We know that some group's grievances may take a long time to fix. Others are close to being finalised. So we want you to consider how to sort your grievances into priorities. Which are the “hot” issues at the moment? Which are the “cold”? Each problem group should rank their priorities. Which issues can wait? Which issues are close to completion? Second, brothers and sisters, please consider short term methods to emphasise the priority issues and have them fixed. In the next six months what can we do quickly to ensure that they're fixed? This government, the government of General Chavalit Yongchaiyut, hasn't got long to go. It will probably dissolve by the end of March. It will pass new election laws [called for by the new constitution] and probably call an election for sometime in May. This means they only have five or six

months to go. This government has made the most effort of any government to address our problems, if we compare them, and has several ministers and MPs like Adisorn, who understand our grievances and have tried to address our petitions. If they only have a few months to go, we need to think about what we can do, because we don't know who will be the government after that. To summarise, the economic problems and the political problems of this government will result in it only lasting another five or six months.

Finally, he introduced a third issue for consideration. Allied organisations had been requesting their support, usually in terms of symbolic public announcements of Assembly of the Poor support to the media. He asked that the *pho khrua yai* meeting consider how the Assembly should respond to these requests. Sawang summed up the agenda for their small group discussions: "One, work out a list of priority issues. Two, what methods should we use to make the government hurry up? Three, the role of Assembly of the Poor in assisting allied organisations?"

In setting an agenda that required the villagers' delegates to set priorities brought to the fore a tension between the "social contract" to be faithful to every group's petition, and Sawang's politically pragmatic argument that the movement, as a whole, should throw its weight behind a few groups' issues in the short term. This proved to be a difficult issue for the meeting to resolve. Some delegates immediately opposed the idea, arguing that "we should work together to see that every group's grievance is fixed, just like we did during the protest rally".

After 10am we broke for morning tea, then reconvened in the small "problem groups." I joined the Dams Group which gathered in the Tambon Administration Office. Somchai, from the Mun River Project, chaired. With tousled hair, and eyes squinting from lack of sleep, he wore a stained, white cotton shirt with a jagged hole in the back, baggy chequered pants and a natural dyed *phakhaoma* tossed around his neck. Nuat, a young Wildlife Fund activist, and Maliwan joined in frequently. We all sat on the lino covered floor, about fifty people completely filling the room.

Somchai reiterated the agenda set by Sawang. "We have three dams that we're waiting on, and four proposed dams. So we need to look at which is close to a conclusion." Prasit suggested that they should focus on proposed dams like Kaeng Sua Ten as the

appointed committee was currently reviewing this dam. “We need to make them see that the dam should not be approved before the government dissolves”. Another Kaeng Seua Ten delegate backed him up and talked about the need for the government to make a public announcement that the dam has been cancelled and not just postponed. Maliwan listened intently to each speaker, sitting cross-legged like everyone else, often taking notes. She wore a white T-shirt featuring an image of Che Guevara, black slacks, and her trademark large glasses.

Maliwan: The Assembly of the Poor has the power to bargain with the state, but we can't win over proposed dams as politicians will just postpone the decision. Thailand has never had a policy to cancel dam construction, because dam construction is a fundamental and important way of national development. What we can do is stop the dam while we try to educate the public and encourage society to reconsider this means of development and find another way.

No one challenged this and the discussion turned back to existing dams, dominated by Nuat and Somchai. One of the Sirinthorn delegates brought up the government promise to establish a 1,200 million baht fund from which families affected by the dam would be paid compensation. He argued that one priority should be pressing the government to accelerate the compensation process from the fund. This led to an explanation by Somchai about how the process of examining the claimants and approving payments will proceed, with a series of questions about the details from some of the delegates. Eventually, Somchai and Maliwan proposed to the group that they put the Sirinthorn Dam at the top of their list of priorities, followed by Pak Mun. Somchai called for a show of hands for those delegates supporting this proposal. Everyone raised their hand.

The discussion then returned to proposed dams. Somchai and Nuat continued to dominate the debate. The delegates discussed a proposal to pressure the government to institute “public hearings” (*pracha-phijan*) to enable local people to participate in assessing dam proposals. Again the local Kaeng Seua Ten delegates argued that all four proposed dams were “hot” but that Kaeng Seua Ten was “boiling” and most urgent.

Somchai gave a brief summary of the discussion and once again called for a show of hands to ratify the group's resolution. “We should give priority to Kaeng Seua Ten in order to improve the decision-making process for this and other dams. And we propose

that the committee visits the locality to investigate the villagers' security."

Finally Somchai asked the meeting to suggest how they could act on these priorities and pressure the government to work faster. Several delegates complained that one of the greatest problems was getting provincial level officials to actually attend committee meetings and comply with the directives of the central government for initiating processes of evaluation and compensation. They agreed to try to set deadlines for each stage in the process and try to force government officials at various levels to keep to them. No one raised the issue, however, of what action to take if government officials failed to comply with their deadlines. We broke for lunch, having run out of time to discuss the final issue of how to assist allied organisations, and reformed again with the whole group in the temple hall at one o'clock.

Maliwan chaired this final session, calling up one delegate from each problem group at a time to take the microphone and report on their discussions to the meeting as a whole. Each small group had prepared lists of priorities, but whether or how these five separate lists should be prioritised by the *pho khrua yai* as a whole remained undiscussed. The NGO activists seemed satisfied that the villagers' delegates had started thinking about collective priorities and the process could continue at future meetings. Each spokesperson for the small groups also reported their ideas for strategies and opinions on how to give support to organisational allies. Although the Dams Group had not had time to consider this issue, their nominated spokesperson gave his personal opinion: "We have struggled with poverty and to address our own problems. From my own perspective and vision it is not appropriate to take the Assembly of the Poor's name and let other organisations use it in the media."

The meeting was presented with a range of proposed strategies and responses from each of the small group discussions. The State Projects group proposed holding a *pho khrua yai* meeting right at Government House in Bangkok to put pressure on the government. The Forest and Land group proposed a similar idea of arranging a face to face meeting with the Prime Minister. The Alternative Agriculture group argued that delegates should identify and "lobby" (using the English word) key people in the government and bureaucracy. With regard to requests by allied organisations, most groups proposed that

the *pho khrua yai* as a whole must consider each organisation's campaign on its merits before deciding. Maliwan gave a quick summary and asked if anyone had any further comments on these issues. Perhaps acknowledging the fact that the issue of collective priorities remained ambiguous and unresolved, Maliwan announced that "each local community will follow up the progress of its specific petition". No further discussion on the proposed new collective strategies, or when and how they might be enacted, took place, however.

Maliwan went on to talk about how they should respond to requests from new groups to join the Assembly. This was interesting as it highlighted the position and influence of NGOs within the Assembly of the Poor. Maliwan explained her own position first:

We need conditions on groups who want to join us. They must have *phi liang*¹¹ people who are able to look at all the details, who know the problems, the possible solutions, people who work in the locality. If we don't have conditions like this we could take on more problems than we could solve. How should we decide whether to accept such groups, what conditions should we impose? Does anyone want to propose something on this issue?

In the discussion that followed, most delegates agreed with Maliwan that any prospective new group must have an NGO working with them and supporting them. Prasit argued that they "must be very careful to make sure that such groups have not trespassed into forest or destroyed natural resources in any way". A Sirinthorn delegate agreed that there should be "limits and conditions. The Assembly needs to assess how any new group will affect our campaigns, and look carefully at their reasons and grievances for joining the network."

Other delegates argued that the Assembly had a responsibility to refuse no group with legitimate grievances. "Not all groups have access to local NGO supporters and therefore this shouldn't be a restriction." One Isan delegate declared, "We have a responsibility to assist groups with real problems. We have to investigate in their local

11 The phrase *phi liang* usually means older carer, benefactor or nursemaid. *Phi* is a fictive kin term meaning elder brother or elder sister. *Liang* means to look after or nourish (Wit, 1996). Villagers and activists in the Assembly often use the term in referring to NGO advisers, implying a superior person entrusted with looking after the group. I discuss the implications of this for power relations within the

area. We hold to justice, that must be our aim always, as far as helping other groups, we should give them an opportunity to join with us”.

The activists continued arguing for the need for *phi liang*. Phijit, another young NGO activist and Somchai's brother, took the microphone:

We've talked about this several times. Then we thought that groups who want to join us should: one, be a group that we assess as having true problems, real hardships; two, have already organised as a group; three, have *phi liang* responsible. Why do we need conditions like this? Because any new group without *phi liang* would stretch the ability of the *phi liang* we have already.

Daeng from the Mun River villagers' organisation disagreed about the importance of NGO advisers. “We have experienced problems before with regard to *phi liang*. Really, regarding our problems there has been a lot of conflict [among NGOs]. The advisers (*thi phreuksa*) have limitations. We have to ask the advisers, are they prepared and ready to fight also?” Maliwan brought the debate to a conclusion: “To summarise, we have to consider the conditions in each local community and the appropriateness of having them join our network.”

The meeting concluded with a discussion about when and where to hold the next *pho khrua yai* meeting. Jaroen, who works for the NGO Friends of the People in the Assembly's secretarial office, proposed a special meeting to mark the second anniversary of the birth of the Assembly on 10 December. Jaroen proposed, therefore, that the *pho khrua yai* meet at Thammasat University and use the occasion for generating publicity. The meeting rejected this. A delegate from Isan took the microphone and argued that 10 December was less than two months away and right in the middle of rice harvesting. This would not be a convenient time or place to meet again so soon. Many others agreed. Another delegate proposed that, instead of meeting together in Thammasat, each group organise local celebrations which would be more convenient and less demanding on members' time. This was carried by a show of hands.

The *pho khrua yai* meeting closed with a *bai si su khwan* ceremony, a ritual which

Assembly in the next section.

involves calling the *khwan*, each person's souls, and binding them to his or her body with a cotton thread tied around one wrist. The ritual was presided over by a local *mo tham*, an expert in reciting Buddhist sacred texts, in this case an elderly grandfather from the village who had spent many years as a monk. Each regional *pho khrua yai* meeting that I attended concluded with this ceremony. Everyone present in the *sala* participated by taking a bundle of prepared cotton threads and tying them around each other's wrists while wishing the recipient prosperity and a good life. It is a ritual which serves not only to look after the spiritual health of celebrants, but also emphasises a sense of community and belonging (see Tambiah, 1984:223-244,322). By this time – late-afternoon – however, the delegates were tired and sleepy, and the afternoon's muggy heat had driven most people out of the hall. Many groups immediately packed up to leave, and would travel all night to return home.

NGO Activists and Power

Focusing on collective leadership by villagers also raises the question of the power and influence of the NGO activists who attend every meeting. Despite their small numbers this group of middle-class activists exert a great deal of influence and power over the *pho khrua yai* process. Furthermore, a consideration of the position of NGO activists leads beyond the Assembly rhetoric that authority resides in the *pho khrua yai* meetings to find other locations of power in the network, for example, the Secretarial Office in Bangkok.

As seen in the previous section, Assembly members use various terms to describe the NGO activists' position and role within the movement. The Assembly's magazine states that they occupy the "position of advisers only. Currently the Assembly of the Poor has over 20 advisors who all have more than 10 years experience of struggle" (Assembly of the Poor, 1997d). An Assembly video gives a slightly more detailed picture:

Our advisers comprise NGO workers and villagers' leaders with campaign experience. They act as *phi liang*, coordinating negotiations with the state, communicating with the media and allied organisations in the city, administering the preparation of negotiation documents and summarising our issues to explain to the public (Assembly of the Poor, 1997j).

As we saw in the account of the *pho khrua yai* meeting above, the words *phi liang* are

often used to refer to the NGO workers. Unlike the words *thi preuksa*, which I have translated above as “adviser”, the phrase *phi liang* connotes an unequal relation between NGO activists and villagers. To refer to the activists as *phi liang*, therefore, suggests that they occupy a superior position with a responsibility to care for and guide the villagers.

The power and influence of the NGO activists within the Assembly can be seen in a range of ways in the ethnographic accounts presented in this chapter. The activists chair the *pho khrua yai* meetings and set the agendas. While they encourage every *pho khrua yai* representative to participate and have a voice, and promote democratic processes such as ballots, being highly articulate and experienced campaigners they often dominate discussions and present their own views persuasively. NGO activists possess the education, training and experience – in other words the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973) – needed for the production of documents and other media in the Assembly’s campaigns. They often speak on behalf of Assembly members in negotiations, media interviews and public relations campaigns, and in the Assembly’s dealings with allied organisations.

The Assembly secretarial office employs a small team of media specialists who produce media such as videos, publicity leaflets and the Assembly’s magazine, called *Siang prachachon* (Voice of the People, see Figure 3 on following page). The activists and media specialists who write most of the Assembly documents and produce virtually all its media for publication occupy a very influential position in constructing and representing the public image and voice of the Assembly, and do this virtually independently from the “collective leadership”. For instance, at the *pho khrua yai* meeting at Ban Don Chai we were shown a video produced by the “Media Section” of the Assembly. Entitled *Samatcha khon jon: phalang haeng prachachon* (The Assembly of the Poor: Power of the People), the video was mainly a record and commentary on the 1997 protest rally in Bangkok, which the commentator described as “the longest lasting mass people’s rally ever”. It was filmed, written and produced by activists from the secretarial office in Bangkok, and with its high quality images and editing, professional commentary and background music, it had been produced to provide ready made, prepackaged professional audio-visual material to television producers, as well as distribute to NGO and academic allies. The video ran for thirty minutes. Almost everyone watched with intense interest and everyone that I spoke with afterwards



สมัชชาคนจน
 สำนักงานรณรงค
 180 อองคกรพนธนคร

วารสารของสมัชชาคนจน เพื่อสิทธิชุมชน เพื่อสิ่งแวดล้อม และเพื่อคนทั้งประเทศ

เสียงประชาชน

VOICE OF PEOPLE • MAGAZINE

ปีที่ 1 ฉบับที่ 1 เดือนตุลาคม พ.ศ. 2540 ราคา 35 บาท



Figure 3 The first issue, October 1997, of the Assembly of the Poor's magazine, *Siang prachachon* (Voice of the People), produced by a team of NGO workers.

approved, saying that they were very pleased with the video. They are all well aware of the importance of the media in reporting and representing their campaigns.

Democracy and Decision-Making in the Local Villagers' Organisation

Examining the process of collective leadership and decision-making at the *pho khrua yai* level provides only half the picture. We need to examine and assess processes of "grassroots democracy" at the level of the villagers' organisation and the village, and understand the links and relationships between these processes at different levels. In the rest of this chapter I describe democracy in action in the Mun River Villagers' Committee. It is easy to see the processes of collective decision-making in action in the general meetings at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, but if these processes are to have an impact at village level then they rely on the active networks of *kaen nam* and their ability to communicate with and organise village level meetings which allow democratic decision-making at that level.

In late September 1997 the Mun River villagers' organisation called a general meeting to discuss the progress of its compensation campaign and, in their expectation of impending success, future directions of the organisation.¹² A number of significant proposals were raised at the meeting, and the ways these were debated and resolved reveals a great deal, not just about the democratic processes operating, but about ongoing efforts by NGO and villager activists to develop political consciousness and a culture of solidarity.

Over 200 villagers attended, representing members in 55 villages. Siang chaired, Somchai spoke in his position as advisor and Wari, a local man and Cooperative employee, acted as secretary. Everyone spoke in Lao except for Somchai, who spoke in Central Thai with an occasional Lao phrase. Somchai began by explaining the progress of the government agreement to pay appropriate compensation to Mun River families whose fishing livelihoods had been destroyed by the dam and current problems holding up the process.

12 This account draws on detailed fieldnotes and tape recordings of the meetings on 27-9-1997, Mun

Then Somchai explained why the Rasi Salai Dam group had returned to Bangkok to protest. "Do you remember that during the protest rally we all agreed to help each other?" he asked. "Then what do you think you should do to help the Rasi Salai group now?" Siang immediately argued that their success was tied in with the Rasi Salai villagers, and asked again how they thought they should help. This sparked a great deal of chatter and discussion among the people assembled, but no one spoke up to address the meeting as a whole.

"Suppose you were them, what would you want?" Somchai prompted.

Pla emphatically responded, "Encouragement, the power of people and resources (*kamlang jai, kamlang khon, kamlang sap*)." There was general agreement to help in some way. Someone proposed that they collect a set amount of money from each family to send. Amounts of five baht and ten baht per family were put forward. Another villager suggested that they to dispatch a contingent of people to join the Rasi Salai villagers' rally.

Siang reiterated Somchai's question, "If we here were in their situation what sort of assistance would we want?" He called on them to demonstrate solidarity and unity with the Rasi Salai villagers' struggle. Then he put the amount of money to be collected to a vote, asking for a show of hands to vote for either five or ten baht. The majority voted for ten baht. Somchai asked how many people they would send. The meeting became rowdy as people earnestly debated the issue among themselves. Someone proposed twenty delegates; someone else one delegate for each village, making 55 people.

Somchai tried to hurry the decision-making process up. He called out, "Who votes for one per village, hands up! Twenty people, hands up!" The result was still unclear, so he asked Wari to make a careful count of hands. A small majority of 117 votes to 97 favoured sending twenty delegates. Somchai explained that they would travel to Bangkok together in three days time and join the Rasi Salai villagers' rally for three to

five days. He asked them to think about who would like to volunteer.

As a preamble to the next item on the agenda Somchai went on to talk about the impending compensation payment. He suggested that even if they win the 525,000 baht or 15 *rai*¹³ of land compensation they may not be able to rehabilitate their livelihoods and may be no better off, so they should continue to work together and face future problems together as a organisation. Then he handed over to Siang, who had written on the blackboard “Future directions of the Mun River Villagers’ Committee”. Siang proposed that when they receive their compensation payments, each family donate 15,000 baht to “establish a fund for activism and study of long term problems” which Siang referred to as a “foundation” (*munlanithi*) and also as a memorial (*anusorn*) to their struggles.

This provoked a great deal of talk and debate. The meeting became louder and rowdier as participants discussed the issue of donating some of their expected and hard-earned compensation money. Some quickly did their sums and realised that Siang’s proposal would bring in over 45 million baht, and so suggested that 5,000 would be plenty. Siang and Daeng raised the possibility of the parasite schistosomiasis becoming a problem in the future as it had in other large dams, and the need for funds to engage experts to research the subject. Another male *kaen nam* spoke out in support of establishing a foundation but argued that 15,000 baht was too much and proposed 10,000.

Somchai asked if everyone understood what the purpose of a “foundation” was. “For people who live here it is necessary to make plans about what they will do with the money once it is paid out.” Siang explained again his idea for a foundation. Daeng emphasised that if they do establish a fund then a committee of villagers will administer it, not the NGO advisers.

Somchai tried to bring the meeting to make a decision. “The issue is, do you agree with the proposal to mobilise funds to campaign for economic improvements – it might be to demonstrate and bargain for long term solutions. Please raise you hand if you agree to

13 A rai is a unit of measurement equal to 1,600 square metres.

set up such a fund.” Almost everyone showed their support. “If you don’t agree please raise your hand. You agree. We have a resolution!” Then he suggested that they return to their villages and consult with the remaining members about how much they think they should set aside, and what form the foundation should take.

The next agenda item was the progress of government appointed committees in making the final assessment of who was eligible to receive compensation. The process required the preparation of lists of eligible villagers by Village Heads and *kamnan*, which were then submitted to district level committees for ratification. Siang and Somchai explained that some Village Heads had bribed the villagers by refusing to register them unless they handed over a percentage of the payment. Some official lists differed from the Mun River villagers' organisation lists of members. Thus, it was a controversial and emotive issue affecting everyone and sparked a lot of comment and discussion. Most were excited by what appeared to be the imminent success of their campaigns and protests, while also anxious and frustrated with the slow and sometimes corrupt bureaucratic processes required by the government. The conversation noise level grew and Siang tried to reassert order and his control as chairperson. Many people ignored him and continued speaking amid the general hubbub. Others, thinking that all the agenda items had been covered, began to leave.

When the meeting fell quiet again Siang castigated the assembled villagers for not demonstrating “unity” (*ekkaphap*). Somchai also admonished them to maintain an orderly meeting. “Brothers and sisters, a strong organisation relies on members that cooperate, who know sacrifice, who have order and discipline, invest importance in the organisation’s activities. Only a strong organisation is capable of bargaining with the government to have its problems solved. If we call a meeting and people come and just sit and chat together, or sit outside, what will you tell your fellow villagers back home? Or if you pay no attention to the proceedings, and don’t know the meeting’s decisions and don’t pass them on to your fellow villagers, this will surely cause conflict within our organisation. Because the heart of an organisation is in its meetings. Please give importance to everything we discuss here.”

Siang continued the lecture, appealing to the importance of solidarity, unity, order

(*khwam rabiap*) and discipline (*winai*) in meetings in order to achieve their goals. After a final announcement about the Pak Mun Agricultural Cooperative, Siang finally brought the meeting to a close. It had lasted almost three hours. Most of the assembled crowd quickly dispersed, while a few remained behind to discuss who would join the twenty delegates to the Rasi Salai villagers.

Reaching into the Village

Over 214 people attended the Mun River Villagers' Organisation committee meeting, representing over three thousand members in fifty-five villages. The NGO activists tried to ensure that each village was represented by at least two *kaen nam*, but in many cases more came because of the keen interest in the progress of the compensation process. Somchai had reminded them during the meeting: "Brothers and sisters, you must remember that in your capacity as leaders, as representatives, one of your number represents many people. Each time you raise your hand, you must consider what each person back in the village will think."

Their job now as *kaen nam*, as the "axis" of a network reaching into the village, was to communicate the meeting's proposals and resolutions to the other members in their village and reach some sort of agreement or consensus at the village level that they would then report back to the next committee meeting as a basis for negotiating a collective resolution. I was able to observe this process only a few times during the course of the year, but the process was very similar in each case and accorded with villagers' descriptions of the role of *kaen nam* in many interviews as well.

That evening, after the meeting at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, I travelled with Panya back to his village and his house on the banks of the Mun River near Phibun township. He and a woman, Duangjai, had attended the committee meeting as the *kaen nam* for their village, where sixty-seven families, almost every household, had joined the campaigns of the Mun River Villagers' Committee, the Assembly of the Poor protest rallies, and registered for compensation. After 6pm Panya drove his old, rickety motorcycle to the house of the Village Head and used the village public address system to announce a meeting of the Mun River Villagers' Committee members the following

morning at 6 am.

The next morning we walked together to the Village Head's house, arriving a few minutes after 6am. Panya carried a battered notebook with him to the meeting, in which he had scribbled notes during yesterday's meeting. At first there was no sign of anyone. After waiting for ten minutes, once again Panya used the PA system to call the members to the meeting. We watched as a handful of monks from the village temple filed slowly through the dusty lanes, receiving the morning's offerings. After the monks made their rounds villagers began to trickle in. Panya waited another fifteen minutes until just over thirty villagers gathered around the house. That meant that only about half of the membership in this village bothered to send a representative to this meeting.

First he announced the latest news about the Agricultural Cooperative. Then he related the problems of the Rasi Salai group. "If they don't get their compensation payment, then Sirinthorn won't get paid and neither will we." He explained the meeting resolution that the Mun River Villagers' Committee would send 20 representatives and the request for 10 baht from each family. Panya gave his own elaboration on the use of the donated money. "Every village will collect the money and send it to the Centre on 29th. Anyone can take it. This portion of money is for travel expenses for the delegates who go to join the protest. And for rice and food for them all collectively. We will take money for the protesters to help them. Every local group is going to help them! 121 problem groups." This sparked some discussion at the edges of the gathered villagers, so Panya argued for its importance. "This 10 baht per person is a necessity! We help them. If we were in that situation, they would help us just the same. Brothers and sisters, what do you think? Can we help them? *Soi dai bo?*"

Many villagers called out "Yes, we can help them. *Soi dai!*"

"If we don't help them, they won't help us," someone else asserted. There were no dissenting voices. Panya took this as agreement and quickly moved on to the next issue.

"If you receive the compensation money that we petitioned for, 525,000 baht, do you think you could put a portion of that into a foundation to assist our group? Are you

ready to do this? Yesterday, a proposal was made that 10,000 baht, or 1000 baht, or 5,000 baht per family should be donated. Brothers and sisters, you have to decide and I will report back to the general meeting.”

This stimulated a burst of vigorous discussion among the group. One older woman joked that she would “give a little bit at a time!” Everyone laughed. Panya emphasised that it was only if and when they received their compensation, to which she replied, “If we get 500,000 take the 10,000. Take it!”

A male villager exclaimed, “You’re asking for money from people who haven’t got any!” Someone else called out, “10,000 is too much!” Everyone talked and called out at the same time. Someone called out, “One thousand!” and a competing voice immediately replied, “One thousand is not enough!” Another man cried out, “They want too much money! Too much!”

Panya became more defensive, raising his voice above the other competing voices. He tried to restore order by calling for a vote on each of the proposed amounts by a show of hands, but many villagers ignored this and continued debating the issue heatedly among themselves. A growing number of voices began calling out “Five thousand!”

Panya argued that they had often contributed small amounts during their campaigns to assist him and other representatives; this was part of their collective struggle. “This money won’t go to any person! It will be put into a collective fund. We will look after it collectively. When problems arise in the future, we’ll use this money. Every village is considering this. Five thousand?” The meeting became quiet again. Villagers nodded and no one opposed this proposal.

Once again Panya moved quickly onto his next item. He explained the timetable for assessment of the lists of compensation claimants over the following few weeks. He was one of the villagers’ delegates for the Phibun district-level committee. There were few questions on this issue. This group of villagers knew that their names were all on the list for their village. The Village Head here quietly but openly supported the Assembly and was highly regarded. Villagers began to stand up and leave as Panya made a few remarks

closing the meeting. It had lasted for forty minutes.

Managing Conflict at the Local Level

To write of democratising processes and transformations in political culture and political consciousness among local people, however, is not to suggest a romanticised and unrealistic picture of villagers' organisations expressing only democratic and cooperative principles. I have already described the power and influence of NGO activists in the Assembly of the Poor. There is also conflict at the local level within villagers' organisations, and between villagers and NGO activists. In this section I describe how one deep-rooted conflict has been played out among factions of the Mun River Villagers' Committee and their NGO advisors. Importantly, I will show how principles and practices of democracy were used by the NGO activists to manage and attempt to resolve the conflict.

The Pak Mun Agricultural Cooperative has been riven with conflict and factionalism since its inception. The Cooperative, a separate legal organisation to the Mun River Villagers' Committee but with much the same membership and leadership, was established in 1995 after the villagers won some financial compensation for the three year dam construction period (see Chapter 4). The government imposed a condition on the compensation agreement that two-thirds of the 90,000 baht payment for each family would be used to establish an agricultural cooperative to be administered by the villagers themselves and be used to rehabilitate the livelihoods of its members.

The conflict first emerged in 1996 as the villagers set up the organisational structure required under Thai law for the administration of agricultural cooperatives. The villagers elected 15 people from among their ranks to form the administrative committee. Almost all of these committee members came from among the ranks of the *kaen nam* and leaders of the Mun River Villagers' Committee. Siang, the current Chair of the Mun River Villagers' Committee, became the Chair of the Cooperative's management committee, while Samart, a previous chair, became the Treasurer. Around the same time they employed a full-time manager with experience in managing and administering agricultural cooperatives. Once the administrative structure was in place and the newborn

cooperative registered with the government, they received the promised compensation payment, over 100 million baht (Interview, Wanphen, Cooperative manager, 23-9-1997).

A conflict among the administrative committee members emerged almost immediately, as debate began on how to use and invest the funds. The conflict centred on a proposal by a faction in the committee, lead by Samart, to invest a substantial proportion of the Cooperative's funds in a petrol station on the Phibun-Khong Jiam Road. They argued that this would return a good profit to the co-op and hence benefit all its members. As Om, a young woman who works for the Cooperative, explained:

Another faction thought that whatever they did with the money, they had to be careful, because the funds didn't just belong to the steering committee, but to all members. So they thought the funds should be used to rehabilitate members' livelihoods. For instance, they proposed small revolving loans for members, but which might not make any interest. The government gave it for this purpose, to reconstruct livelihoods destroyed by the dam. So the different voices clashed. They argued about it continuously, every meeting (Interview, Khong Jiam, 26-9-1996).

For a year the conflict virtually paralysed the activities of the Cooperative. The first manager resigned and went to work elsewhere. The internal squabbling in the Cooperative made it difficult to find qualified people to replace him and it took many months before they finally found Wanphen, a young woman and trained accountant, to fill the position. The management committee was unable to make effective decisions or agree on the future direction of the organisation. They argued over where to purchase land for construction of the Cooperative's new office and storehouse.

Maliwan and the other NGO activists tried to use democratic means to resolve the conflict. To bring the debate about where to buy land for the Cooperative's headquarters to a conclusion they called a general meeting in which *all* members of the Cooperative were invited. A vote was taken and a site chosen. The divisive and acrimonious debate over the petrol station continued however, and concern grew as rumours and accusations circulated that the pro-business faction was dominating decisions about builders and contractors, and was getting corrupt kickbacks in the process.

The NGO activists decided to call another general meeting. But first they spent two

months visiting villages and talking to the *kaen nam*, explaining the positions of the two opposing factions and promoting the idea that the ordinary members should set the overall policies of the Cooperative. In mid-1997 they called the general meeting and in an effort to deepen participation and representation of villagers' views they asked that each village send at least four delegates, making a total of more than two hundred and twenty people. The meeting was presented with a choice between two general directions for the Cooperative: invest in business, or rehabilitate members livelihoods as the basic strategy. Predictably, after the groundwork of the NGO workers the meeting voted for the second policy direction, which would see the development of small-scale revolving loans and a range of small scale strategies aimed at individual member families rather than collective capital investments.

At this general meeting the NGO advisers also successfully advocated a reform of the steering committee, arguing that it should be expanded from the original fifteen to include one delegate from each village, making a total of fifty-five committee members. Their intention was to broaden the representative base of the steering committee in order to overcome the stalemate between the two opposed factions and weaken the power of the pro-business faction. In each of the fifty-five villages Cooperative members voted to select their delegate to the reformed steering committee. In many villages the factions lobbied for their own candidates. Moreover, most of the original committee members won positions on the new committee. Although this democratic strategy defused the factional squabbling and got the steering committee going again, the pro-business faction still held positions and continued exerting their influence. This even extended to attacks on Cooperative staff members who opposed them, a move which created tensions between some villagers and the NGO activists. Wari, for example, was criticised as being under-educated for his position and put under pressure to resign. The other Cooperative and NGO staff based in the Centre immediately closed ranks in support of Wari and opposed any staff changes (Fieldnotes, Mun River Villagers' Centre, June – September 1997).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the ways in which democracy and collective decision-

making are actually put into practice in a range of levels and social contexts within the Assembly of the Poor. In doing so I have drawn upon the concept of civil society as a way of theorising the social conditions in which these examples of 'grassroots democracy' take place. One influential view of civil society that I discussed above sees it as the political space, free from domination by state institutions, in which people exercise the freedom to organise autonomously and develop their collective capacities to influence the state. This theoretical perspective sees civil society as a social domain in which to develop participatory and democratic associations and thus challenge existing practices and social institutions that support domination and inequality. A different perspective, originating in the work of Gramsci, conceptualises civil society as the social domain where ideological and cultural processes operate to organise social life and promote *consent* to the dominant elite and existing social order. Thus, this perspective does not regard civil society as a privileged domain of freedom and democratisation. Rather, civil society encompasses the whole range of non-state institutions and organisations which structure social life and may either reproduce or challenge hegemony. Such a Gramscian analysis has suggested an approach to social transformation involving a cultural and ideological struggle to democratise institutions within civil society and challenge state hegemony, rather than mount direct assaults on the state (see Introduction).

Two key issues arise from these discussions of civil society and democratisation. First, does the ethnographic study support the oft-made argument that social movements are acting to expand the boundaries of civil society (that is, conditions of liberty and free association) at the expense of state domination? Second, just how democratic are emerging organisations within such a civil society? Does the Assembly of the Poor represent a forum of grassroots democracy where power, authority and decision-making are vested in the villagers themselves? Certainly, the writings of Suthy (1997) and Praphat (1997a, 1998) on the Assembly of the Poor point to affirmative answers to these questions. Suthy (1997), for example, argues that the Assembly of the Poor is a leader in the struggle to strengthen civil society in Thailand and manages itself according to real grassroots democracy.

How we answer the first question depends, to a certain extent, on our definition of civil

society. The word 'space' in the often-used shorthand definition 'political space' is clearly meant metaphorically for the particular socio-political conditions in which people are able to associate free of coercion. But where are we to find those conditions in practice, except by close study of the real spaces and places where people join together to organise and collectively pursue political purposes? In this chapter I have described in detail a range of spaces and places where members of the Assembly meet to negotiate and make collective decisions. The *pho khrua yai* meeting in Don Chai Village, the meetings at the Mun River Villagers' Centre, and the village-level meetings organised by *kaen nam*, all testify to the endeavours of the movement to create and sustain new spaces for participation and collective action. Taken together with the previous chapter on protest, these spaces can be seen to be interconnected by thriving social networks and extend from village meetings to street rallies and offices in Bangkok. My argument is that these new contexts of participation and interaction certainly have expanded the social domains available for political association and contesting the power of the state.

Turning to the second issue, how democratic are these organisations and decision-making processes that have emerged within the Assembly of the Poor? Cooperative and democratic forms of organisation do not necessarily emerge naturally or spontaneously from groups of villagers or slum dwellers. As I have shown, the movement enacts forms of collective decision-making and participatory democracy in the internal management of the Assembly as a whole and at the level of its member Villagers' Organisations. The *pho khrua yai* meetings are only hubs in a network of communication and negotiation throughout the movement, and through which power and decision-making is negotiated and carried out. In such a complex network, the NGO activists, *pho khrua yai* and *kaen nam* who play such key roles in creating and sustaining these networks stand to exert greater power and influence than the rank and file villagers who they represent. Furthermore, as I have illustrated, ostensibly democratic practices can be used to *manage* conflict within the movement and direct the decision-making process. NGO activists, who, although possessing no voting rights in meetings, usually set the agendas, guide discussions and very often elicit grassroots ratification of their proposals. The case of the internal conflict within the Pak Mun Agricultural Cooperative illustrates how the NGO activists effectively used participatory and democratic processes to manage conflict and also to produce an outcome that they desired.

Clearly, however, Assembly leaders promote a 'culture' of grassroots democracy and collective decision-making, or a "culture of equality" as Praphat calls it (1997b:40). They encourage participation in debates and discussions, and the use of voting to reach collective resolutions. I see this as part of a struggle over grassroots 'political culture' in the face of pervasive state bureaucratic structures that extend right down into the village and cultivate and promote a culture of bureaucratic paternalism and deference to government officials. Enacting collective leadership and a form of grassroots democracy that overtly gives power to local community representatives (and not those sanctioned by the state) no matter how flawed or riven with internal power differentials, represents a challenge to the dominant political culture and paternalism in by state officials.

Photograph 15. The khrua yai meetings were always held in village temples, a convenient but also highly symbolic site belonging to the village community. This temple, Wat Khirphet in the hills just outside Chiang Mai, Laos, in July 1997. The temple and village are inclosed by a private security operation on the hill above.



Photograph 16. A pho khrua yai meeting in progress inside the wat temple hill.



Photograph 15. *Pho khrua yai* meetings were always held in village temples, a convenient but also highly symbolic site belonging to the whole community. This temple, Wat Khiriket in the hills just outside Chiang Mai, hosted the July 1997 meeting. The temple and village are threatened by a private quarrying operation on the hill above.



Photograph 16. A *pho khrua yai* meeting in progress inside the *sala wat* (temple hall).

8 Conclusion: Sources of Power and Social Transformation

This study has presented an ethnographic account of the Assembly of the Poor, informed by debates within the fields of political ecology and social movements theory. A limitation of political ecology that I identified and discussed in the Introduction has been a lack of attention to explaining how people move from a situation of environmental degradation or crisis to purposeful collective action. To a large extent I would argue that this stems from political ecology's focus on a Marxist analysis of social structure (rather than agency) in its analysis of the causes and consequences of environmental conflict. Social movements in Marxism stem from the structural position of particular groups in the economic organisation of society, for example working class union movements. Explaining the structural and economic causes of participants' grievances, however, falls far short of explaining the complex processes underpinning protest actions. While the destructive effects of large-scale development may create ecological crises and threats to local livelihoods, which should weaken people's capacities for organised collective responses, much depends on how people give meaning to their grievances, define their position in society and thus their potential for collective opposition, and are able to organise effectively and create links with other social sectors and organisations

Therefore, I also drew on theoretical approaches that have been developed in the social movements literature, as social movements have long posed the problem of how to analyse *agency* and collective action as they contribute to social change (but still with the context of social structure). This thesis, however, is not an attempt to present a new theory of Third World environmental movements. Social movements are, after all, complex social phenomena whose salient characteristics are determined by the particular theoretical and analytical point of view we adopt (see Scott 1990:5; Melucci 1998:423). Rather, my intention has been to bring certain theoretical insights to bear on the empirical, ethnographic data in order to better understand and explain the nature of the Assembly of the Poor in the context of Thai society. Ethnography is always grounded in specific historical and social contexts.

The central concern of this study, then, has been to bring analytical approaches from political ecology and social movements theory to bear on analysing and interpreting the Assembly of the Poor in the context of Thai society. I explored the historical origins of the movement, the social networks embracing NGOs, grassroots organisations and underlying mobilisation, and the constitution of cultures of solidarity and political identity. In the final two substantive chapters (6 and 7) I focussed on two crucial modes of action of the Assembly - protest and attempts to democratise the internal workings of the movement within the domains of civil society.

An ongoing debate in the political ecology and social movements literature centres on the potential of grassroots movements to effectively transform social structures of inequality and exploitation in Third World societies. Here in the final chapter I return to this overarching issue and address the question: what conclusions can we draw from this study about the potential of grassroots environmental movements for social and political transformation?

The study as a whole has tried to explore and analyse the social processes which brought individuals and groups together into the Assembly of the Poor, the sources of solidarity, ways in which they have organised and sustained the movement, and the political strategies they have chosen to struggle with the state and represent themselves in the public sphere. Each chapter revealed ways in which sometimes small - sometimes more substantial - gains were made in finding common ground on which to build autonomous organisations and networks, pushing back the power of the state or winning battles for compensation. But, as Bryant and Bailey (1997:185) write, "Growing activity by grassroots organizations thus does not in itself signal a shift in power relations between the weak and the strong in many Third World countries". In Thailand, events since the economic crash of mid-1997 and the change of government a few months later in November of that year indicate that the movement's political gains have been eroded by an aggressive state and changed economic climate. The Assembly is on the defensive, and any claim that it is transforming social structures or democratising Thai society in any far-reaching way would be overly optimistic. After all, the Assembly represents not more than two hundred thousand people, from the poorest sections of Thai society.

Therefore, in returning to questions of power and social transformation in this final chapter, I will argue that we can draw four main conclusions from this study of the Assembly of the Poor. First, in terms of the material outcomes of the Assembly's protests and petitions the movement has had some significant, but limited successes. Therefore I will briefly sum up the material and political outcomes since the 1997 rally, and the erosion of government promises and political opportunities in the light of changing economic and political circumstances.

Second, I argue that the dynamic social networks underlying the Assembly, which extend from local groups and NGOs to national and international organisations, represent relatively new and powerful forms of organisation and activism that are changing the nature of rural politics.

Third, I argue that new forms of identity and oppositional consciousness are emerging through the campaigns of the Assembly. Throughout the study I have tried to show how the constitution of collective identity and the deployment of culture are important dimensions to understanding the collective action and political struggles of the movement. The point I emphasise here is that they are also transformed through the experience of participation and mobilisation.

Fourth, I reiterate the Assembly's ideological and discursive challenge to dominant discourses of development in order to emphasise that struggles to change unequal relations of power must necessarily involve conflicts over knowledge, discourses and meanings as they shape practice.

Material and Political Outcomes

In addressing issues of power and social transformation it is appropriate to consider the material and political outcomes of the Assembly's protests and petitions. I paid considerable attention to the 1997 protest rally in Chapter 6, arguing that mass demonstrations constitute the movement's main political strategy. The mediation and support of the mass media appeared to be important at that time. The protest won wide

coverage in the media, much of it sympathetic and supportive, especially in daily newspapers and weekly magazines, but also on the independent TV channel iTV. The protest forced government representatives and bureaucrats to come to the bargaining table and negotiate face to face with Assembly representatives over the demands in its petition. But what have been the results? To what extent has the Assembly been able to compel the state to respond to its demands, provide compensation for livelihoods destroyed by development, and guarantee local community rights within the development process? Piven and Cloward, writing about popular protest in the United States, have argued that protesters only “win, if they win at all, what historical circumstances [have] already made ready to be conceded” (1977, quoted in Della Porta & Diani, 1999:250). In 1997 did the Thai state concede only what it was already predisposed to give?

When the rally dispersed on 2 May 1997 it seemed that the Assembly had achieved a great deal. Chavalit’s government had given a guarantee to consider and address all of the grievances of the petition. In the months that followed the government implemented some of its promises to the Assembly and set up joint committees to follow through with others. Cabinet cancelled the proposed Saiyaburi Dam and initiated reviews of the four other proposed dams on the petition, including Kaeng Sua Ten and Lam Dorm Yai. Cabinet approved compensation for 2,526 families affected by the Sirinthorn Dam and 3,084 families affected by the Pak Mun Dam, announced the establishment of a multi-billion baht fund to cover it and began registering villager claimants.

By November 1997 thirteen grievances out of a total of 122 listed in its petition had reached a tangible conclusion satisfactory to the Assembly. The government paid compensation to 272 families affected by small dams (210 million baht), and to 1,154 families whose land was flooded by the Rasi Salai Dam (over 363 million baht). Four petitions on state construction projects were successful, including compensation for 73 families who lost land to a construction project at the Chong Mek border checkpoint (47 million baht). Altogether, the Assembly had won over 652 million baht compensation for people affected by development (Assembly of the Poor, 1997k; Praphat, 1998:207). This was unprecedented.

In mid-1997 the Thai “bubble economy” finally burst. After the Chavalit government

deregulated the exchange value of the baht on the international currency market, Thailand rapidly entered a period of economic and financial crisis. In the face of its inability to deal decisively with the economic downturn the Chavalit government collapsed in November after a no-confidence vote in parliament. A coalition, led by the Chaun Leekpai and the Democrat Party, took over the government without elections. The new government ignored all previously established Assembly-related committees, and set out on an aggressive campaign to reverse the previous government's concessions to the movement (Baker, 1999). Bureaucratic officials and regional levels of government now refused to follow through any unfinished promises by the previous government. For example, the Irrigation Department and provincial officials restarted plans to construct the Phong Khun Petch Dam in Chaiyaphum (Pasuk, 1999). As the effects of economic crisis reverberated throughout the city-based middle class, many sections of the previously supportive media seemed to reflect a growing lack of sympathy for rural demands for compensation and safeguards to their livelihoods.

The Assembly initiated a fresh round of demonstrations during 1999, this time dispersed throughout the country at strategic localities and sites of conflict, including another rally at the Pak Mun dam site (Assembly of the Poor, 1999, *Bangkok Post*, Internet Edition, 8 June 1999; Baker, 1999). These protests have won relatively little coverage or support in the media and in some cases have been dispersed with force by local authorities. I suggest that while the urban, middle class, whose interests are reflected in the media, was prospering during the economic boom time of Thailand's bubble economy, an influential section supported the environmental and democratic campaigns of the rural and urban poor in the Assembly. But with the onset of economic crisis and recession, this progressive section of the middle class and the media seems to have lost sympathy with the demands for economic compensation by the poor.

Networking and Activism within Civil Society

Social movements in the developing world, as in the West, have expanded the social domains for challenging existing institutional arrangements for the exercise and mediation of power, and the ideologies on which they are based. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the concept of "civil society" is increasingly being applied to analyse the

social and political contexts of organisation and the manifold ways in which social movements challenge relations of power in complex societies. One approach, influential in political science perspectives on Third World NGOs, conceptualises civil society as the autonomous political space in which previously marginalised groups are able to form independent organisations and networks to mediate with the state and pursue their political goals. From this perspective NGOs and grassroots' organisations provide opportunities for uncoerced association, articulation of collective interests and political advocacy that may not be available through other conventional political channels (Clarke, 1998; Fisher, 1998). They emerge in and enlarge social spaces free from state power and enable participation and democratic decision-making, thus democratising society from the "bottom-up".

This study certainly supports this argument about the importance of local villagers' organisations for enabling the participation and representation of dissenting voices, and mobilisation of people in collective action. I have focused on their emergence and activities in several chapters, but especially in Chapter 4 on the Mun River Villagers' Committee. But what I want to challenge here is the idea that the "political space" in which they emerge and operate is somehow distinct and autonomous from the "political space" of the state at local levels. Writing about civil society in Southeast Asia and Thailand, Rodan (1996), and Hewison and Rodan (1996), do argue that we need to break down the conceptual dichotomy between state and civil society. For instance, they point out that the state determines the legal and political framework in which civil organisations must act, arguing that

it is not the emergence of organisations that is the measure of an expanded civil society. Rather state actors must effectively legitimate the rights of such bodies to engage in political activity and even to challenge the exercise of state power before civil society can be said to be established (Hewison and Rodan 1996:41).

Thus, their work explores the complex relationships and interdependence between the two domains, but they also constantly fall back on the ambiguous description of civil society as "independent political space". Indeed, the spatial metaphor of civil society, usually implying separate and distinct domains of action, pervades much of the writing about civil society: it is described as a "realm", a "sphere", a "space for action" "outside" of the domains controlled by the state (Van Rooy 1998:19-21). As I argue in the

Conclusion to the previous chapter, where are we to find these conditions of uncoerced association except in real spaces and places where people meet and organise for political purposes. As this study shows, however, these spaces are *not* necessarily distinct or separate from state-controlled spaces.

At a general theoretical level, considering the degree to which the Thai state has been able to “penetrate” to the local level with bureaucratic, ideological and administrative institutions (Hirsch, 1989; Missingham, 1997; Turton, 1989), it is difficult to imagine the village as providing “autonomous political space” for organised dissent. As I showed in Chapter 4, for example, a majority of Village Heads and *kamnan*, who are employed by the state, actively attempt to suppress opposition to state development projects and offer few effective means for participation. This, of course, is why the emergence of villagers’ organisations *independent* from such state agents is so important for opening up new avenues for participation and opposition. But this is not to say that there are no supportive groups or individuals occupying positions within the state; where they exist they appear to be crucial allies assisting Assembly activities. A salient example is the support of the *kamnan* in Don Chai village (see Chapter 7). He works actively with the villagers’ organisation opposing the Kaeng Seua Ten dam and his support was crucial in having Don Chai host the Assembly’s *pho khrua yai* meeting in October 1997. Moreover, during the meeting he opened up the Tambon Administrative Office and its resources for Assembly activists to use. Other examples include a handful of Village Heads in communities along the Mun River who support the Assembly, encourage people to participate and use the resources (and prestige) of their official position to assist the movement (such as use of the Head’s house for meetings, public address systems etc). At least three of these Village Heads had been elected because of their anti-dam activism. In these sorts of cases, how do we conceptually distinguish between the “political space” of the state and “civil society”? Clearly they intersect to a certain extent, and I would argue that in Thailand, where state institutions are so pervasive at the local level, these sorts of links with progressive or dissident state officials play an important part in building opposition within civil society.

The growing impact and power of the social and organisational networks which constitute the Assembly also carry implications for understanding notions of civil society.

The local organisations of the Assembly's rank and file are part of thriving horizontal and vertical social networks which interconnect villagers with NGOs, academics, students and other political activists who all act and speak in various contexts to construct what we call the "Assembly of the Poor". Moreover, these complex networks link Assembly members to other organisations both within the country and outside; to journalists and media corporations; to individuals within the state bureaucracy; and to ideas, information and resources flowing through increasingly global networks.

These networks mean that the boundaries of the Assembly are actually difficult to define. Moreover, they further challenge any clear-cut distinction between civil society and the state. This is because the networks extend to supportive and sympathetic state officials and government representatives at many levels. I have already mentioned examples of these interconnections at the local level. Prior to a merit-making and fund raising festival staged by the Mun River Villagers' Committee at a local temple in early January 1997 the Assembly announced the names of three national Members of Parliament, one member of the Ubon Provincial Assembly and two local *kamnan* symbolically supporting or sponsoring the event (Fieldnotes, 15-12-1996, Khong Jiam). At other levels, some NGOs such as the Thai Volunteer Service, include high level state bureaucrats on their boards. In Chapter 6 I mentioned the key role played by MP Adisorn Plianket in representing the government in negotiations with the Assembly during and after the 1997 protest rally. Activists believed that Adisorn's background as a member of the communist insurgency in the 1970s and his friendship with an activist academic who works closely with the Assembly contributed to his positive attitude.

Such networks represent powerful forms of organisation and activism that are changing the nature of rural politics (Pasuk, 1999). They are what Castells refers to as "networks of social change". They "do more than organising activity and sharing information. They are the actual producers, and distributors, of cultural codes" (Castells, 1997:362). The potential of these networks to generate knowledge, mobilise resources, people, information and representations in the public sphere is clearer when we consider that they link the Assembly of the Poor with many powerful institutions in Thai society and beyond (for example, the Declaration of 182 Allied Organisations during the protest). They connect student organisations and university academics, newspaper, radio, TV and

magazine journalists, and NGOs from local community development projects in rural areas to international environmental and activist organisations, and other government's aid and development agencies, civil service bureaucrats at all levels from rural teachers to senior administrators, village heads, national MPs and provincial assembly representatives.

Such networks bring groups of local people together to support each other's campaigns and protests, but also enable local people to speak and poor villagers' voices to be heard and broadcast in many social contexts and public spaces. They enable local people to access and interpret useful information about state policy, legal regulations and resources, human rights and official avenues for petition and representation. They translate local claims into technical language for petitions to the state and publicity campaigns, academic, scientific and legal arguments. They produce media including video and TV productions, newspaper reports, books, magazines, music, art and other performances. They organise academic and expert debates and public forums, attended by university academics and rural villagers sitting side by side. They mobilise allies and supporters to at least symbolic expressions of support. These networks are creating a two-way flow of people, resources and information between local contexts and global contexts.

Not all members of the Assembly have equal access to, or move through these networks in the same way, of course. All of the NGO activists I interviewed travel constantly and extensively throughout the country, and many of them travel overseas on occasions. A handful of villagers from each local organisation (and in many cases not the village elite) move from village, to national NGO forums or meetings with government ministers and senior bureaucrats, to international conferences of Third World peoples' organisations or delegations to the United Nations and the World Bank. For these few villagers the experience increases their status, and gives them new confidence and skills.

The importance of NGOs in building and sustaining these networks is crucial, of course, and this brings us back to the issue of their importance in the movement. I have discussed their power and influence in the movement, and the contradictions with the professed democratic ideologies and practice of collective leadership in the Assembly in

Chapter 7. However, to argue that Third World grassroots organisations' dependence on the support of NGOs is a *weakness*, as some do (Bryant & Bailey, 1997:186; Jelin, 1998:411-412; Rigg, 1991), is to miss the point. My study of the Assembly leads me to believe that the movement would not exist in the form it does without the historical activities of NGOs. Professional activists are crucial to the success of broad-based movements for social change (Goodwin & Skocpol, 1994:261-2). NGOs work at building up a constituency among the poor but, as many villagers told me, if the NGOs were not starting from villagers' own perceived needs and goals, the villagers would not go with them. As Siang says, villagers' organisations and NGOs are "two things that go together".

New Forms of Identity and Consciousness

In the Introduction I argued for an approach that pays close attention to identity, culture and the symbolic dimensions of collective action and political struggle. This is important, as many writers have argued (for example Castells, 1997; Fraser, 1997:153; Jordan & Weedon, 1995), because the formation and representation of collective identity is always involved when subordinated groups attempt to redefine their position in society and change the social order. Thus, I have described how the movement deploys culture strategically, and socially constructs identity and solidarity as a basis for mobilisation and protests. I considered the ways in which political identity is constituted in ideological and symbolic terms that addresses both outsiders (ie the state) and members of the Assembly, seeking to have them recognise shared problems and a shared, meaningful *purpose* in the movement. Through the articulation of collective identity, individuals not only recognise their own interests within the collective, but also acquire new consciousness of collective agency and their potential to make their own history. Thus, I argue that the culture and consciousness of poor, marginalised people constitutes a fundamental terrain of social change for the Assembly.

This argument brings us back to the work of Gramsci and the theoretical concept of hegemony. For Gramsci, and many recent Marxist and post-Marxist theorists who draw on his work, hegemony refers to the ideological and cultural dimensions of the exercise of power throughout civil society. Hegemony suggests ways in which the day to day

lives, knowledge, and consciousness of subordinated groups are shaped by pervasive ideological meanings, cultural practices and values stemming from dominant groups. Writers such as Raymond Williams (1977:110), as I mentioned in the introduction, interpret hegemony as a lived process involving everyday cultural *practices*, which he calls “practical consciousness”, embedded in relations of domination. Such an approach is consistent with Bourdieu’s rejection of a division between the material and cognitive worlds through his notion of “habitus” and his theory of practice (see also Pieke, 1996:49-51). Habitus involves the acquisition of particular dispositions, “constituted by practice and constantly aimed at practical — as opposed to cognitive — functions” (Bourdieu, in Wacquant, 1992:42). As I have shown throughout this study, it is through the practice of meetings, networking and protesting that villagers come to embody activism and “cultures of solidarity” (Fantasia, 1988). In their words, actions, even body language, villagers come to *be in the world* in different ways to their former dispositions — not merely change their consciousness.

For these reasons, this study is grounded in the lives, experiences and practices of the actual members of the Assembly of the Poor, rather than an approach solely concerned with ideology. Thus, it is important to look at the practices, processes and experiences through which villagers come to have new dispositions, new ways of acting, embodying and responding to relations of power. Social movements emerge out of the day to day lives, and activities of the people who participate in them. In fact, I have argued throughout that this grounding in the material local grievances and problems of livelihood of members provides the principle motivating force for large numbers of people to mobilise and participate in the Assembly’s activities and protests. Their own day to day lives, locality, sense of “community” and relationship to place are the most immediate sources of identity for most of the ordinary villagers in the Assembly (see Castells, 1997). For many groups the assertion of a locally-based collective identity became a rallying point and a strategy of resistance to the projects and processes of “national development”.

For the Assembly, the starting point for a political consciousness is in people’s local, material problems, particularly the destructive effects of large development projects implemented by state agencies. These provide the concrete experiences from which to

develop a political consciousness of the causes of poverty and inequality, and challenge the hegemony of development as an ideology. A group of NGO activists who advise the Assembly of the Poor put it this way:

Social movements begin from the issues pertaining to the immediate impacts of development on the livelihood of the people. In recent years, people have learned to connect their immediate problems with political issues such as the state and power structure. The development of this trend shows higher political consciousness of the lower income group. People are quite often underestimated in their political awareness and commitment to the movements (Bantorn et.al., 1994:121).

These “immediate problems” of livelihood also provide the motivations to participate in meetings, forums, villagers' organisations and networks. Thus, such “grassroots organisations” become the vehicles for better organising and mounting cooperative, collective efforts but also for representation, delegation and petitioning of local and outside authorities and agencies. They also become the domains for transforming political consciousness. A common strategy of the NGO activists who work with the Assembly is to arrange meetings and forums in which villagers are encouraged to speak from their everyday, local experiences but in contexts that encourage them to find common ground and linkages with other groups with similar problems.

As I described in Chapter 6, participation in campaigns, rallies and protests provide experiences that dialectically transform identity, solidarity and political consciousness. Participants literally learn through experience that “Solidarity is strength” and see their own political agency in action. “We have to join together in great numbers. Join together for a long time before they will listen to us. The strength (*phalang*) of poor people is only in the protest rally”. The protests asserted and *demonstrated* the agency of the poor and their collective power in numbers, coupled with their right to have a voice in a democracy and, at the very least, express their petition and have their grievances recognised by the state and the public sphere. That is why the representation of the history of protest events provide significant touchstones in Assembly documents and discourses. It is also why Assembly activists and leaders regarded a measure of “tangible success” so important to the conclusion of the protest rally in 1997. What my ethnographic account of protest in chapter 6 shows is the great amount of work that Assembly members put into addressing each other, engendering a culture of solidarity

and community, developing political consciousness asserting the agency and power of the poor as a collective force, and constructing and negotiating their sense of collective identity.

Ideological and Discursive Challenges to Development

For many writers theoretical conceptions of “hegemony” have increasingly converged with discourse analysis deriving from the work of Foucault (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Smart, 1983). Much of the recent work of Escobar is concerned with “development” as a “hegemonic discourse” shaping representations of the “underdevelopment” and determining the dominant policies and practices of social and economic change in Third World societies (1995a; 1995b). Peet and Watts (1996b) argue that this hegemony of modernisation and development is being contested and subverted by various forms of environmental discourse. The importance of environmental movements in the Third World, from their perspective, is their opposition and challenge to dominant discourses of development which shape people’s relationships with the economy and environment:

...as well as being practical struggles over livelihood and survival, [environmental movements] contest the ‘truths,’ imaginations, and discourses through which people think, speak about and experience systems of livelihood (Peet & Watts, 1996b:37).

I have explained the Assembly’s ideological and discursive challenges to development at various points in this study. In attacking discourses of development which promote industrialisation, entrench the political and economic power of the elite and social relations of inequality and exploitation, the Assembly contests a central hegemonic discourse on which legitimacy of the dominant elite is based. There are at least two dimensions to the ideological strategies of the movement. First, the Assembly has had to find ways to challenge the powerful discourses of “national development”, modernisation and economic growth which the state and other social forces deploy to legitimate large scale projects. Second, the Assembly constantly struggles to give meaning to its actions, and to frame its petitions and demands in terms that carry legitimacy and symbolic power in public debates.

At the heart of the Assembly’s challenge to state power is an argument about the effects of development on local communities. Its critique of development is expressed in terms

of communities' rights to participate in development decisions about their own local resources, articulated in terms of community rights, sustainable development and democratisation. Environmentalism has proven powerful as it has provided ways of giving specific *local* environments meaning and value in terms of the national interest. In other words, environmental protection and sustainable development have provided powerful discourses for overcoming the representation of "national interests" over and above "local interests". In these terms villagers have been quick to reformulate themselves as the legitimate managers and conservationists of their local environments. For example, we saw this in Mun River villagers claims about their sustainable use of the fisheries before the dam (Chapter 4), and in the move by villagers threatened by the Kaeng Seua Ten Dam to reposition themselves as local conservationists (Chapter 7). Thus, the Assembly draws upon global discourses of environmentalism, while at the same time reinterpreting and re-articulating it in terms of the defence of their rights to land and livelihood.

Thus, claims about relationships with local environments provide one of the grounds from which the Assembly challenges the ideological underpinnings and practice of development by the state. These claims are linked with appeals for community rights, participation and democratic reform (Chapter 3). All of these terms are ambiguous and carry multiple and contested meanings, but are used in Assembly discourse as political symbols in a struggle over power relations and political decision-making in Thai society.

We cannot judge the political effectiveness of the Assembly of the Poor simply on the material outcomes of its protest campaigns. As I show throughout the thesis, members of the Assembly of the Poor mobilise, campaign and struggle against domination in a number of social situations and material contexts, and enact through a range of media a cultural, ideological and discursive struggle over the exercise of power. It is an ongoing struggle.

* * *

On 23 March 1999 the Mun River villagers once again began a prolonged protest and occupation of the Pak Mun Dam wall, calling on the government of Chuan Leekpai to follow through with compensation agreements reached in 1996 and 1997. They were

joined by other Assembly groups from the Northeast, including Sirinthorn Dam villagers and two other dam groups (Pennapa, 1999). According to NGO activists at the Mun River Villagers' Centre about 5000 people have joined the rally. After six months they were still there, as there has been little response from the government (Noi, personal communication, 28-9-1999). I can imagine them, sheltering in the makeshift encampment, conducting their ordinary lives as an extraordinary protest. No doubt, Panya Tongyu is performing again at the protest site, adding a new verse to his song.

Alvarez, Evelina (1997) *Revolution and the Politics of Culture: Latin American Social Movements and the Challenge to 'Actual Existing Democracy'* in Brazil. In Richard O. Fox & Chris Smith (Eds.) *Democrat Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Movements*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 43-67.

Alvarez, Sonia E. (1997) *Latin American Postmodernism: 'Go Global' - Trends of the 1990s and Challenges for the New Millennium*. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics/Battle/Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 24-55.

Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, Evelina, & Escobar, Arturo (Eds.) (1998) *Cultures of Politics/Battle/Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, Evelina, & Escobar, Arturo (1998) *Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements*. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics/Battle/Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 7-32.

Amara Pongsapich, & Nitya Karamwattana (1996) *Philosophy, NGO activities and corporate funding in Thailand*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute.

Amara Santinimmedol (1997) *Localist de laos: Banat is going poor*. Bangkok Post, 2 June.

Angom Kaewsoo, & Kosal Kamsam (1997) *Displaced at Si Phan Don Villages*. In R. Holloway (Ed.) *Asian Political Economy: Development, NGOs and the Rural Poor in Asia*. London: Earthscan, 114-121.

Asst. Archibairana, Dek. Phayaporn, Chaiyap, Kana, & Phumma Ingkarn (1997) *Thailand's New and Reviving Politics*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Andalee Kiatrut (1997) *Highly paid is making poor*. Bangkok Post, 23 January.

Asok Nakant (1997) *Organic agriculture: education for organic production, plantation, administration and development, NGOs and people's organizations, issues of cooperation in the sector world*. In *The Development Support Committee: Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations in Thailand*. Bangkok: TDSC, 11-13.

Asok, W. (1997) *The idea: The dream is there, but it requires money?* *Development*, 19(3), 36-38.

References

- Adams, W. M. (1990) *Green Development: Environment and Sustainability in the Third World*. London: Routledge.
- Alvarez, Sonia E. (1997) Reweaving the Fabric of Collective Action: Social Movements and Challenges to 'Actual Existing Democracy' in Brazil. In Richard G. Fox & Orin Starn (Eds.) *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 83-117.
- Alvarez, Sonia E. (1998) Latin American Feminisms "Go Global": Trends of the 1990s and Challenges for the New Millennium. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 293-324.
- Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, Evelina, & Escobar, Arturo (Eds.) (1998a) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Alvarez, Sonia E., Dagnino, Evelina, & Escobar, Arturo (1998b) Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1-32.
- Amara Pongsapich, & Nitaya Katalaeradabhan (1994) *Philanthropy, NGO activities and corporate funding in Thailand*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute.
- Ampa Santimatanedol (1997) Lecturer dedicates himself to giving poor farmers a voice. *Bangkok Post*, 2 June.
- Amporn Kaewnoo, & Kosol Suthangkool (1989) It Happened in Si Phon Thong Village. In R. Holloway (Ed.) *Doing Development - Government, NGOs and the Rural Poor in Asia*. London: Earthscan, 114-120.
- Anat Arbhabhira, Dhira Phantumvanit, Elkinton, John, & Phaitoon Ingkasuwan (1988) *Thailand Natural Resources Profile*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Anchalee Kongrut (1997) Bhichit visits protesting poor. *Bangkok Post*, 28 January.
- Anek Nakabut (1997) *Ongkon phatthana ekkachon lae ongkon prachachon phapruam khwamruammeu nai thotsawat na* [NGOs and people's organisations: images of cooperation in the decade ahead]. In Thai Development Support Committee, *Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations* (in Thai). Bangkok: TDSC, 11-15.
- Anurak Wangpattana (1996) Pak Mun: The lessons are clear, but is anyone listening? *Watershed*, 1 (3), 16-23.

- Assembly of the Poor (1995) *Khamprakat lumnammun* [Mun River Declaration]
- (1996) *Kho riak rong saneo to ratthaban* [Petitions to the Government]. Bangkok: Assembly of the Poor.
- (1997a) *Kha chajai khong thang ratchakan* [Official expenses]. *Siang prachachon (Voice of the People, the magazine of the Assembly of the Poor)*, 1 (1), 76-77.
- (1997b) *Kheuan sanyalak haeng hai naphai khong manut lae sapphayakon thammachat* [Dams: symbol and source of the disappearance and destruction of human beings and natural resources]. *Khaosot* newspaper, 25-5-1997, pp. 31.
- (1997c) *Kho seneo reuang rathathammanun to khanakammakan yok rang rathathammanun* [Constitutional submission to the Constitution Drafting Committee]. Bangkok.
- (1997d) *Khwam pen ma kanchumnum mahakam tuang sanya samatcha khon jon* [Background to the Assembly of the Poor protest]. *Siang prachachon*, 1 (1), 16-18.
- (1997e) *Lamdap kan riak rong lae chumnum kon ma pen samatcha khon jon*. *Siang prachachon* [Order of petitions and rallies leading to the formation of the Assembly of the Poor], *Siang prachachon*, 1 (1), 8-15.
- (1997f) *Phu thi sia chiwit* [Those who died]. *Siang prachachon*, 1 (1), 80.
- (1997g) *Pramong pheunban phaktai* [Southern local fishers]. *Siang prachachon*, 1 (1), 58-59.
- (1997h) *Samatcha khon jon ekkasan phoei phrae chabap thi 1* [Assembly of the Poor Publicity Leaflet No.1]. Bangkok: Assembly of the Poor.
- (1997i) *Samatcha khon jon ekkasan phoei phrae chabap thi 3* [Assembly of the Poor Publicity Leaflet No.3]. Bangkok: Assembly of the Poor.
- (1997j) *Samatcha khon jon phalang haeng prachachon* [Assembly of the Poor: Power of the People] [Video Program]. Bangkok: Friends of the People.
- (1997k) *Sarup kankaekhai panha samatcha khon jon* [Summary of Assembly of the Poor problems resolved]. *Siang prachachon*, 1 (1), 21-33.
- (1997l) *Sarup kho riak rong prakobkaanjerajaa kaekhaipanhaa samatchaakhonjon* [Summary of Petitions for Negotiation]. Bangkok: Assembly of the Poor.
- (1997m) *Sen thang prawatsat samatcha khon jon* [Historical path of the Assembly of the Poor]. *Khaosot*, 18-3-1997, pp. 31.
- (1999) The Declaration of the Assembly of the Poor at the Pak Mun Dam, March 30, 1999. English translation disseminated on email by International Rivers Network
- Baker, Chris (1999) Assembly of the Poor: the new drama of village, city and state. Paper presented at the International Thai Studies Conference, Amsterdam, 4-8 July.
- Baker, John M. (1995) Formation, Maintenance, and Operation of Environmental NGOs in Thailand. Unpublished PhD, Northern Illinois University.
- Bantorn Ondam (1997) Forum of the Poor in Thailand. *Alliance of Hope: Forum of the*

- People's Plan for the Twenty First Century (PP21) (7), 27-28.*
- Bantorn Ondam et.al. (Eds.). (1994) *Alliance of Hope: Towards the 21st Century People's Plan for the 21st Century*. Bangkok: PP21 Organising Committee.
- Barfield, Thomas (Ed.) (1997) *Dictionary of Anthropology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bello, Walden, Cunningham, Shea, & Poh, Li Kheng (1998) *A Siamese Tragedy: Development and Disintegration in Modern Thailand*. London: Zed Books.
- Boggs, Carl (1995) *The Socialist Tradition: From Crisis to Decline*. New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1973) Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.) *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*. London: Tavistock, 71-112.
- Bowie, Katherine A. (1997) *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Breazeale, Kennon (1975) *The Integration of the Lao States into the Thai Kingdom*: Oxford University.
- Brown, Andrew (1997) Locating working-class power. In Kevin Hewison (Ed.) *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*. London: Routledge, 163-178.
- Bryant, Raymond L. (1992) Political Ecology: An emerging research agenda in Third-World studies. *Political Geography*, 11, 12-36.
- Bryant, Raymond L., & Bailey, Sinead (1997) *Third World Political Ecology*. London: Routledge.
- Bryant, Raymond L., & Parnwell, Michael J.G. (1996) Introduction: Politics, Sustainable Development and Environmental Change in South-East Asia. In Michael J.G. Parnwell & Raymond L. Bryant (Eds.) *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People, Politics and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge, 1-20.
- Buchidta Sangkaew (1997) *Watthanatham pla lae jut jop dtam nan phran pla mae nam mun* [Fishing culture and the low point of Mun River fishers]. Bangkok: TDSC.
- Callahan, William A. (1995) Non-Governmental Organizations, Non-Violent Action, and Post-Modern Politics in Thailand. *Sojourn*, 10, 90-115.
- (1998) *Imagining Democracy: Reading "The Events of May" in Thailand*. Singapore: ISAS.
- Castells, Manuel (1997) *The Power of Identity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Chakrit Ritmontri (1997a) Cabinet considers long-term fund. *Bangkok Post*, Internet Edition: www.bangkokpost.com, 30 April.
- (1997b) Chavalit acts on demands of protesters. *Bangkok Post*, 12 March.
- (1997c) Southern fishermen help boost city rally. *Bangkok Post*, 19 February.
- Chalotorn Kansuntisukmongkol (1994) Reappraisal of Cost-Benefit Analysis: Pak Mun Dam Project. Unpublished Master of Economics, Thammasat University, Bangkok.
- Chatthip Nartsupha (1984) The Ideology of 'Holy Men' Revolts in Northeast Thailand. In

- A. Turton & S. Tanabe (Eds.) *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 111-134.
- (1991) The Community Culture School of Thought. In Manas Chitakasem & Andrew Turton (Eds.) *Thai Constructions of Knowledge*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 118-141.
- Chayan Vaddhanaphuti (1984) *Cultural and Ideological Reproduction in Rural Northern Thai Society*: PhD thesis, Stanford University.
- (1993) Traditions of Village Study in Thailand. In P. Hirsch (Ed.) *The Village in Perspective: Community and Locality in Rural Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Social Research Institute Chiang Mai University, 9-38.
- Cheater, Angela (Ed.). (1999) *The Anthropology of Power: Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures*. London: Routledge.
- Chitraporn Vanaspong (1996) Plight of our poor farmers. *Bangkok Post*, 21 April, pp. 20-21.
- Clark, John (1991) *Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations*. London: Earthscan.
- Clarke, Gerard (1998) *The Politics of NGOs in South-East Asia: Participation and Protest in the Philippines*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen, Jean L. (1985) Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements. *Social Research*, 52 (4), 663-716.
- Cohen, Jean L., & Arato, Andrew (1992) *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press.
- Cummings, Barra J. (1990) *Dam the Rivers, Damn the People: Development and Resistance in Amazonian Brazil*. London: Earthscan.
- Dagnino, Evelina (1998) Culture, Citizenship, and Democracy: Changing Discourses and Practices of the Latin American Left. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 33-63.
- Della Porta, Donatella, & Diani, Mario (1999) *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Demaine, Harvey (1986) Kanpatthana: Thai Views of Development. In M. Hobart & R.H. Taylor (Eds.) *Context, Meaning and Power in Southeast Asia*. Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 93-114.
- Diller, Anthony (1991) What Makes Central Thai a National Language? In Craig J. Reynolds (Ed.) *National Identity and Its Defenders*. Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 86-132.
- Dixon, Chris (1995) Origins, Sustainability and Lessons from Thailand's Economic Growth. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 17, 38-52.
- Donner, Wolf (1978) *The Five Faces of Thailand: An Economic Geography*. Hamburg: Institute of Asian Studies.
- Durno, Janet (1989) Women of the Weeping Prairie - a Perspective on GRID, Thailand. In R. Holloway (Ed.) *Doing Development - Governments, NGOs and the Rural*

- Poor in Asia*. London: Earthscan, 96-113.
- Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (1982) *Environmental and Ecological Investigation of Pak Mun Project, Volume II: Main Report*. Bangkok: EGAT.
- (1984) *Selected Environmental and Ecological Investigation of Pak Mun Project, Volume III: Resettlement Plan*. Bangkok: EGAT.
- Escobar, Arturo (1992) Culture, Practice and Politics: Anthropology and the study of social movements. *Critique of Anthropology*, 12 (4), 395-432.
- (1995a) *Encountering Development: the making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- (1995b) Imagining a Post-Development Era. In Jonathan Crush (Ed.) *Power of Development*. London, 211-227.
- Escobar, Arturo, & Alvarez, Sonia E. (1992a) Introduction: Theory and Protest in Latin America Today. In Arturo Escobar & Sonia E. Alvarez (Eds.) *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1-18.
- Escobar, Arturo, & Alvarez, Sonia E. (Eds.) (1992b) *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Esteva, Gustavo, & Prakash, Madhu Suri (1992) Grassroots Resistance to Sustainable Development. *The Ecologist*, 22 (2), 45-51.
- Esteva, Gustavo, & Prakash, Madhu Suri (1997) From Global Thinking to Local Thinking. In Majid Rahnema & Victoria Bawtree (Eds.) *The Post-Development Reader*. London: Zed Books, 277-289.
- Esteva, Gustavo, & Prakash, Madhu Suri (1998) *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures*. London: Zed Books.
- Fahn, James, & Rojanaphruk, Pravit (1993) Pak Mool puts Egat back in the firing line. *Nation*, 14 March, pp. A8.
- Falkus, Malcolm (1995) Thai Industrialization: An Overview. In Medhi Krongkaew (Ed.) *Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 13-32.
- Fantasia, Rick (1988) *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Feeny, David (1988) Agricultural Expansion and Forest Depletion in Thailand 1900-1975. In J.F. Richards & R.P. Tucker (Eds.) *World Deforestation in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press, 112-146.
- Fetterman, David M. (Ed.). (1993) *Speaking the Language of Power: Communication, Collaboration and Advocacy*. Washington: Falmer Press.
- Fisher, Julie (1993) *The Road From Rio: Sustainable Development and the Nongovernmental Movement in the Third World*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- (1998) *Nongovernments: NGOs and the Political Development of the Third World*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press.
- Fisher, Robert (1993) Grass-Roots Organizing Worldwide: Common Ground, Historical Roots, and the Tension Between Democracy and the State. In Robert Fisher &

- Joseph Kling (Eds.) *Mobilizing the Community: Local Politics in the Era of the Global City*. Newbury Park: Sage, 3-27.
- Fisher, William F. (1995) Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley. In William F. Fisher (Ed.) *Towards Sustainable Development: Struggling Over India's Narmada River*. Armonk, New York: M.E.Sharpe, 3-46.
- Fisheries Department, Government of Thailand (1994) General Survey on Fishes and Fishing Gear in Moon River, Ubolrajthani Province (Title in English, text in Thai). Ubon Ratchathani: Fisheries Department.
- Fox, Richard G., & Starn, Orin (1997) Introduction. In Richard G. Fox & Orin Starn (Eds.) *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1-16.
- Fraser, Nancy (1997) *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*. New York: Routledge.
- Friedmann, John, & Rangan, Haripriya (1993) Introduction: In Defense of Livelihood. In John Friedmann & Haripriya Rangan (Eds.) *In Defense of Livelihood: Comparative Studies on Environmental Action*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press.
- Gadgil, Madhav, & Guha, Ramachandra (1994) Ecological Conflicts and the Environmental Movement in India. In D. Ghai (Ed.) *Development and Environment: Sustaining People and Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell/UNRISD, 101-136.
- Gardner, Katy, & Lewis, David (1996) *Anthropology, Development and the Post-Modern Challenge*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gawin Chutima (1990) *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Thailand (1973-1987)*. Canterbury, Kent: University of Kent.
- Ghai, Dharam (1994) Environment, Livelihood and Empowerment. In D. Ghai (Ed.) *Development and Environment: Sustaining People and Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell/UNRISD, 1-12.
- Girling, John L.S. (1981) *Thailand: Society and Politics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Gledhill, John (1994) *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gohlert, Ernst W. (1991) *Power and Culture: The Struggle Against Poverty in Thailand*. Bangkok: White Lotus.
- Goodwin, Jeff, & Skocpol, Theda (1994) Explaining revolutions in the contemporary Third World (Co-authored chapter). In Theda Skocpol, *Social revolutions in the modern world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith ed.). New York: International Publishers.
- Green, Philip (1993) 'Democracy' as a Contested Idea. In Philip Green (Ed.) *Democracy: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 2-18.
- Grillo, Ralph D. (1997) Discourses of Development: The View from Anthropology. In

- Ralph D. Grillo & R.L. Stirrat (Eds.) *Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg, 1-33.
- Guha, Ramachandra (1989) *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- (1997) The Environmentalism of the Poor. In Richard G. Fox & Orin Starn (Eds.) *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 17-39.
- Gupta, Akhil, & Ferguson, James (1997) Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the End of an Era. In Akhil Gupta & James Ferguson (Eds.) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1-29.
- Hafner, James A. (1990) Forces and Policy Issues Affecting Forest Use In Northeast Thailand 1900-1985. In M. Poffenberger (Ed.) *Keepers of the Forest: Land Management Alternatives in Southeast Asia*. West Harford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 69-94.
- Hall, Anthony (1988) Community participation and development policy: a sociological perspective. In A. Hall & J. Midgley (Eds.) *Development policies: sociological perspectives*. Manchester: Manchester Uni Press, 91-107.
- Hewison, Kevin (1997) Introduction: Power, oppositions and democratisation. In Kevin Hewison (Ed.) *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*. London: Routledge, 1-20.
- and Garry Rodan (1996) The ebb and flow of civil society and the decline of the Left in Southeast Asia. In Garry Rodan (Ed.) *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*. London: Routledge, 40-71.
- Hindess, Barry (1996) *Discourses of Power: from Hobbes to Foucault*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hirsch, Philip (1989) The State in the Village: Interpreting Rural Development in Thailand. *Development and Change*, 20 , 35-56.
- (1990) *Development Dilemmas in Rural Thailand*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- (1991) What is the Thai Village? In C.J. Reynolds (Ed.) *National Identity and Its Defenders*. Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 323-340.
- (1993) *Political Economy of Environment in Thailand*. Manila: Journal of Contemporary Asia Publishers.
- (1997a) Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand: material and ideological bases. In Philip Hirsch (Ed.) *Seeing Forests For Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 15-36.
- (1997b) Introduction: seeing forest for trees. In Philip Hirsch (Ed.) *Seeing Forests For Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1-14.
- (1997c) The politics of environment: opposition and legitimacy. In Kevin Hewison (Ed.) *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*. London: Routledge, 179-194.
- (Ed.). (1997d) *Seeing Forests For Trees: Environment and Environmentalism in*

- Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Hirsch, Philip, & Lohmann, Larry (1989) Contemporary Politics of Environment in Thailand. *Asian Survey*, 29, 439-451.
- Hirsch, Philip, & Warren, Carol (1998) Introduction: through the environmental looking glass: the politics of resources and resistance in Southeast Asia. In Philip Hirsch & Carol Warren (Eds.) *The Politics of Environment in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Hobart, Mark (1993) Introduction: the growth of ignorance? In M. Hobart (Ed.) *An anthropological critique of development: The growth of ignorance*. London: Routledge, 1-30.
- Hubbel, David M. (1992) Antithetical Perceptions of Development and Environment: Village People and the State in Rural Thailand. Unpublished Master in Environmental Studies thesis, York University, Toronto.
- Jarin Boonmathya (1995) Peasant Movement and Organization: A Case of Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA) in Northeastern Thailand. Unpublished MA, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.
- Jelin, Elizabeth (1998) Toward a Culture of Participation and Citizenship: Challenges for a More Equitable World. In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, & Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 405-414.
- Ji Ungpakorn (1997) *The Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice in Thailand*. Bangkok: Arom Pongpangan Foundation.
- Johnston, Hank, Larana, Enrique, & Gusfield, Joseph R. (1994) Identities, Grievances, and New Social Movements. In Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston, & Joseph R. Gusfield (Eds.) *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 3-35.
- Jordan, Glenn, & Weedon, Chris (1995) *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kanoksak Kaewthep (1997) *Jak sahaphan chao-na chao-rai haeng prathet thai (2517-2522) theung samatcha khon jon (2538 -) : khwam to neuang lae khwam khatton* [From the Peasants' Federation of Thailand (1974-1979) to the Assembly of the Poor (1995 -) : Continuities and Discontinuities]. *Sethasatkanmeuang (Journal of Political Economy)*, 8 (3), 91-109.
- Keyes, Charles F. (1967) *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.
- (1989) *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation State*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Korten, David C. (1990) *Getting to the 21st Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*. Connecticut: Kumarian Press.
- Laclau, Ernesto, & Mouffe, Chantal (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lightfoot, Paul, Fuller, Theodore, & Kamnuansilpa, Peerasit (1983) *Circulation and interpersonal networks linking rural and urban areas: the case of Roi-et,*

Northeastern Thailand. Honolulu: East-West Population Institute.

- Linkenbach, Antje (1994) Ecological Movements and the Critique of Development: Agents and Interpreters. *Thesis Eleven* (39), 63-85.
- Lohmann, Larry (1993) Land, Power and Forest Colonization in Thailand. In M. Colchester & L. Lohmann (Eds.) *The Struggle for Land and the Fate of the Forests*. London: World Rainforest Movement/Ecologist/Zed Books, 198-227.
- (1996) Freedom to Plant: Indonesia and Thailand in a Globalizing Pulp and Paper Industry. In Michael J.G. Parnwell & Raymond L. Bryant (Eds.) *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People, Politics and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge, 23-28.
- Macdonald, Laura (1997) *Supporting Civil Society: The Political Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Central America*. Hampshire: Macmillan.
- Mangkorn Tengprawat, & Anutra na Thalang (1992) Poor farm community evicted as year dawns. *Bangkok Post*, 13 January, pp. 6.
- Marcus, George E. (1995) Ethnography In/Of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 , 95-117.
- Marx, Gary T., & McAdam, Douglas (1994) *Collective Behavior and Social Movements: process and structure*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- McAdam, Doug, McCarthy, John, & Zald, Mayer N. (1996) Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes - towards a synthetic, comparative perspective on social movements. In Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, & Mayer N. Zald (Eds.) *Comparative perspectives on social movements: Political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-22.
- Medhi Krongkaew (1995a) Contributions of Agriculture to Industrialization. In M. Krongkaew (Ed.) *Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 33-65.
- (1995b) Introduction: The Making of the Fifth Tiger - Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences. In M. Krongkaew (Ed.) *Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1-12.
- Melucci, Alberto (1985) The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements. *Social Research*, 52 (4), 789-816.
- (1988) Getting Involved: Identity and Mobilization in Social Movements. In Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, & Sydney Tarrow (Eds.) *From Structure to Action: Comparing Movement Participation Across Cultures, International Social Movement Research*. Greenwich, Connecticut, 329-348.
- (1994) A Strange Kind of Newness: What's "New" in New Social Movements? In Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston, & Joseph R. Gusfield (Eds.) *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 101-130.
- (1996) *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1998) Third World or Planetary Conflicts? In Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, &

- Arturo Escobar (Eds.) *Cultures of Politics Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder: Westview Press, 422-429.
- Milton, Kay (1996) *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the role of anthropology in environmental discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Missingham, Bruce (1994) Village Schools and Rural Development in Northeast Thailand. Unpublished MEd thesis, The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- (1997) Local bureaucrats, power and participation: A study of two village schools in the Northeast. In Kevin Hewison (Ed.) *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*. London: Routledge, 149-162.
- Mohanty, Chandra T. (1991) Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. In Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, & Lourdes Torres (Eds.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mongkol Bangrapa (1997) Members voice their opinions. *Bangkok Post*, 16 February.
- Morell, David, & Chai-anan Samudavanija (1981) *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution*. Cambridge: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain.
- Murray, David (1992a) *Current Forest Land Use Conflicts in Thailand: No Room to Move?* Perth: IOCPS.
- (1992b) *Dam(ned) conflicts in Thailand*. Perth: IOCPS.
- Nart Tuntawiroon, & Poonsab Samootsakorn (1984) Thailand's Dam Building Programme: Past Present and Future. In E. Goldsmith & N. Hildyard (Eds.) *The Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams, Volume Two: Case Studies*. Wadebridge Ecological Centre.
- Naruemon Thabchumpon (1997) The Role of Grassroots NGOs in Political Reform in Thailand: democracy behind Civil Society. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Leeds.
- Nusara Thaitawat, & Veera Prateepchaikul (1991) Forums poles apart: No bridging the gap over 'development'. *Bangkok Post*, 20 October, pp. 4.
- NGO-CORD Isan (1997) *NGOs isan: thang lueak haengphalang kanplianplaeng* [Isan NGOs: Alternatives, sources of strength, changes]. Khon Kaen: NGO-CORD Isan.
- Niran Kultanan (1994) People's organisations and the environment: a case study of Northeast Thailand (Isan). *TEI Quarterly*, 2, 51-60.
- Pak Mun Dam Opposition Campaign Committee, & Wildlife Fund Thailand (no date) *Kheuan pak mun: kan phatthana bon khrap namta prachachon* [Pak Mun Dam: Development on the Tears of the People] published pamphlet.
- Parnwell, Michael J.G., & Bryant, Raymond L. (Eds.) (1996) *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People, Politics and Sustainable Development*. London: Routledge.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit (1994) The army's redistribution programme in forest reserves: Case study of the active exclusion of poor villagers in northeastern Thailand. *Thai Development Newsletter*, 33-40.

- (1999) *Civilising the State: State, Civil Society and Politics in Thailand*. Amsterdam: CASA - Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam.
- Pasuk Phongpaichit, & Baker, Chris (1995) *Thailand: Economy and Politics*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Peet, Richard, & Watts, Michael (Eds.) (1996a) *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Peet, Richard, & Watts, Michael (1996b) Liberation Ecology: Development, sustainability, and environment in an age of market triumphalism. In Richard Peet & Michael Watts (Eds.) *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development, social movements*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-45.
- Peluso, Nancy L. (1992) *Rich Forests, Poor People: Resource Control and Resistance in Java*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pennapa Hongthong (1999) Pak Mool protesters seek relief. *Nation*, Internet Edition: www.nationmultimedia.com, 25 March.
- Pfirmann, Claudia, & Kron, Dirk (1992) *Environment and NGOs in Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai NGO Support Project and Friedrich-Naumann Foundation.
- Pieke, Frank N. (1996) *The Ordinary and the Extraordinary: An Anthropological Study of Chinese Reform and the 1989 People's Movement in Beijing*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Pile, Steve (1997) Introduction: Opposition, political identities and spaces of resistance. In Steve Pile & Michael Keith (Eds.) *Geographies of Resistance*. London: Routledge, 1-32.
- Pinkaew Leungaramsri, & Rajesh, Noel (Eds.) (1992) *The Future of People and Forests in Thailand After the Logging Ban*. Bangkok: Project for Ecological Recovery.
- Potter, Lesley (1993) The Onslaught on the Forests in South-East Asia. In H. Brookfield & Y. Byron (Eds.) *South-East Asia's Environmental Future: The Search for Sustainability*. Tokyo/Kuala Lumpur: UNU Press/ OUP, 103-123.
- Pranee Tinakorn (1995) Industrialization and Welfare: How Poverty and Income Distribution Are Affected? In Mehdi Krongkaew (Ed.) *Thailand's Industrialization and its Consequences*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 218-231.
- Praphat Pintoptaeng (1997a) *Kanmueang khong khabuankan chaoban dan singwaetlom: karani samatcha khon jon* [Politics of the villagers environmental movement: The Case of the Assembly of the Poor]. Paper presented at the Round Table Seminar on "The Assembly of the Poor and Democratic Reform", 3 September 1997, Chulalongkorn University, 3 September.
- (1997b) *Khabuankan chaoban dan singwaetlom nai prachathipatai baeb rakya: karani samatcha khon jon* [Villagers environmental movement and grassroots democracy: The Case of the Assembly of the Poor]. Unpublished paper, Chulalongkorn University.
- (1998) *Kanmueang bonthongthanon: 99 wan samatcha khon jon* [Street Politics: 99 Days of the Assembly of the Poor]. Bangkok: Krirk University.
- Pratuang Narintarangkul Na Ayuthaya (1997) Community forestry and watershed networks in northern Thailand. In Philip Hirsch (Ed.) *Seeing Forests For Trees:*

- Environment and Environmentalism in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 116-146.
- Prizzia, Ross (1985) *Thailand in Transition: The Role of Oppositional Forces*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Prizzia, Ross, & Narong Sinsawasdi (1974) *Thailand: Student Activism and Political Change*. Bangkok: DK Books.
- Project for Ecological Recovery (1991) Proceedings of the Meeting Between World Bank Executive Directors and Villagers from the Area of the Pak Mun Hydroelectric Project, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. October 13, 1991. Unpublished report, Bangkok: PER/TERRA.
- (1993) Fish, Forests and Food: Means of Livelihood in Mun River Village Communities (Unpublished Research Report). Bangkok: Project for Ecological Recovery.
- Prudhisan Jumbala, & Maneerat Mitprasat (1997) Non-governmental development organisations: Empowerment and environment. In Kevin Hewison (Ed.) *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*. London: Routledge, 195-216.
- Quinn, Rapin (1997) NGOs, Peasants and the State: Transformation and Intervention in Rural Thailand, 1970-1990. Unpublished PhD, Australian National University, Canberra.
- Rabinow, Paul (1984) Introduction. In Paul Rabinow (Ed.) *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. London: Penguin, 3-29.
- Rahnema, Majid (1997) Introduction. In Majid Rahnema & Victoria Bawtree (Eds.) *The Post-Development Reader*. London: Zed Books.
- Rawadee Prasertcharoensuk (1996) The Alternative Agriculture Network in Thailand. *Thai Development Newsletter* (30), 50-53.
- Redclift, Michael (1987) *Sustainable Development: exploring the contradictions*. London: Methuen.
- (1992) Sustainable Development and Popular Participation: A Framework for Analysis. In Dharam Ghai & Jessica M. Vivian (Eds.) *Grassroots Environmental Action: People's participation in sustainable development*. London: Routledge, 23-49.
- Redclift, Michael, & Sage, Colin (1994) Introduction. In Michael Redclift & Colin Sage (Eds.) *Strategies for Sustainable Development*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1-16.
- Reynolds, Craig J. (1991) Introduction: National Identity and its Defenders. In C.J. Reynolds (Ed.) *National Identity and Its Defenders*. Melbourne: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1-35.
- Rigg, Jonathan (1991) Grass-Roots Development in Rural Thailand: A Lost Cause? *World Development*, 19, 199-211.
- (1994) Alternative development strategies, NGOs and the environment in Thailand: a critique. *TEI Quarterly*, 2 (2), 16-26.
- (1995) Introduction: Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental

- Change in Thailand. In J. Rigg (Ed.) *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand*. Singapore: ISEAS, 3-26.
- Rodan, Garry (1996) Theorising political opposition in East and Southeast Asia. In Garry Rodan (Ed.) *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*. London: Routledge, 1-39.
- Rooney, Sarah (1997) Behind the lines. *Nation*, 30 March, pp. Opinion 1.
- Routledge, Paul (1993) *Terrains of Resistance: Nonviolent Social Movements and the Contestation of Place in India*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Rucht, Dieter & Ohlemacher, Thomas (1992) Protest Event Data: Collection, Uses and Perspectives. In Mario Diani & Ron Eyerman (Eds.) *Studying Collective Action*. London: Sage.
- Rueng Suksawat (1995) Behind the Thai NGOs. In Jaturong Boonyarattanasoontorn & Gawin Chutima (Eds.) *Thai NGOs: The Continuing Struggle for Democracy*. Bangkok: Thai NGO Support Project, 51-68.
- Sanan Chusakun (1997) *Oo Pho Cho Isan: Thodsawat haeng kanruamphalang pheua chumchon* [Isan NGOs: A decade of gathering power for the community]. In Thai Development Support Committee, *Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations* (in Thai). Bangkok: TDSC, 31-50.
- Sanitsuda Ekachai (1990) *Behind the Smile: Voices of Thailand*. Bangkok: Thai Development Support Committee.
- (1995) Grassroots activists in a quandary. *Thai Development Newsletter* (29), 46-48.
- Santhat Sermsri (1989) Population Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand *Culture and Environment in Thailand: A Symposium of the Siam Society*. Bangkok: Siam Society, 71-91.
- Scott, Alan (1990) *Ideology and the New Social Movements*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Scott, James C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale Uni Press.
- Seri Phongphit, & Hewison, Kevin J. (1990) *Thai Village Life: Culture and Transition in the Northeast*. Bangkok: Mooban Press.
- Sethi, Harsh (1993) Survival and Democracy: Ecological Struggles in India. In P. Wignaraja (Ed.) *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*. London: Zed Books, 122-148.
- Sheth, D.L. (1987) Alternative Development as Political Practice. *Alternatives*, 12 (2), 155-171.
- Silliman, G. Sidney, & Noble, Lela G. (Eds.) (1998) *Organizing for democracy: NGOs, civil society, and the Philippine State*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Slater, David (Ed.). (1985) *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America*. Amsterdam: CEDLA.
- Smart, Barry (1983) *Foucault, Marxism and Critique*. London: Routledge.
- Somphan Techa-athik, Wichian Saengchort, Mana Nakham, & Akanit Pongphai (1997) *Kanphatthana khwamkhemkhaeng khong ongkon chao-ban* [Strengthening villagers' organisations]. Khon Kaen: Research and Development Institute,

Khon Kaen University.

- Strinati, Dominic (1995) *An introduction to theories of popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Supawadee Susanpoolthong, & Yuwadee Tunyasiri (1997) Panels to help the poor. *Bangkok Post*, 28 January, pp. 1,2.
- Suthawan Sathirathai, Pinkaew Luangaramsri, Sutharin Khoonpol, & Chusak Wittayapak (1996) *State of Thai Studies on State of the Environment: Property Rights Perspectives*. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiang Mai, 14-17 October.
- Suthy Prasartset (1995) The Rise of NGOs as Critical Social Movement in Thailand. In Jaturong Boonyarattanasoontorn & Gawin Chutima (Eds.) *Thai NGOs: The Continuing Struggle for Democracy*. Bangkok: Thai NGO Support Project, 97-134.
- (1997) *Paet yatti wa duay samatcha khon jon* [Eight Propositions Concerning the Assembly of the Poor]. *Warasan setthasat kanmeuang* [Journal of Political Economy], 1 (April).
- Tambiah, Stanley J. (1970) *Buddhism and The Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1984) *The Buddhist saints of the forst and the cult of amulets*. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni Press.
- Tanabe, Shigeharu (1984) Ideological Practice in Peasant Rebellions: Siam at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. In Andrew Turton & Shigeharu Tanabe (Eds.) *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 75-110.
- Taylor, Bron Raymond (1995) Introduction: The Global Emergence of Popular Ecological Resistance. In Bron Raymond Taylor (Ed.) *Ecological Resistance Movements: The Global Emergence of Radical and Popular Environmentalism*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1-10.
- Taylor, Jim L. (1994) *A Social, Political and Ethnoecological Study of Community Forests and Rural Leadership in Northeastern Thailand*. Nedlands, WA: Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, University of Western Australia.
- Tegbaru, Amare (1997) *Forests, Farmers and the State: Environmentalism and Resistance in Northeast Thailand*. Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University.
- Thai Development Support Committee (1993) *Phapalak ongkon phatthana ekkachon nai sangkhom khaosan* [Images of NGOs in media society]. (Unpublished report) Bangkok: Thai Development Support Committee.
- (1995) NGOs' and People's movements: As reflected by themselves and others. *Thai Development Newsletter* (29), 38-45.
- (1997) *Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations* (in Thai). Bangkok: TDSC.
- Thai Volunteer Service (1996) *Annual Report for 1996*. Bangkok: TVS.
- Thithipat Chuaychu (1995) *Pak mun wan ni tang jak wan wan* (Pak Mun today different

- from yesterday). *Daily news*, 5 September, pp. 5.
- Thomas, Alan (1992) Non-governmental organizations and the limits to empowerment. In M. Wuyts, M. Mackintosh, & T. Hewitt (Eds.) *Development Policy and Public Action*. Oxford: The Open University/Oxford University Press, 117-146.
- Thongchai Winichakul (1994) *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm.
- Tilly, Charles (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- (1986) *The Contentious French*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Tjelland, Rune (1995) Political Brokerage: Rural Activists and Peasant Mobilisation in Northeast Thailand. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oslo, Oslo.
- (1998) Environmentalism as Resistance in Northeast Thailand: The Activist Perspective. In Ing-Britt Trankell & Laura Summers (Eds.) *Facets of Power and its Limitations: Political Culture in Southeast Asia*. Uppsala, Sweden: Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, 253-264.
- Torring, Jacob (1999) *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Zizek*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Turner, Christena L. (1995) *Japanese Workers in Protest: An Ethnography of Consciousness and Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Turton, Andrew (1978) The Current Situation in the Thai Countryside. In Andrew Turton, Jonathan Fast, & Malcolm Caldwell (Eds.) *Thailand: Roots of Conflict*. Nottingham: Spokesman, 104-142.
- (1984) Limits of Ideological Domination and the Formation of Social Consciousness. In A. Turton & S. Tanabe (Eds.) *History and Peasant Consciousness in South East Asia*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 19-74.
- (1987) *Production, Power and Participation in Rural Thailand: Experiences of Poor Farmers' Groups*. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- (1989) Local Powers and Rural Differentiation. In G. Hart & A. Turton (Eds.) *Agrarian Transformations: Local Processes and the State in Southeast Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 70-97.
- Turton, Andrew, Fast, Jonathan, & Caldwell, Malcolm (Eds.) (1978) *Thailand: Roots of Conflict*. Nottingham: Spokesman.
- Van Rooy, Alison (1998) Civil Society as Idea: An Analytical Hatstand? In Alison Van Rooy (Ed.) *Civil Society and the Aid Industry: The Politics and Promise*. London: Earthscan, 6-30.
- Wacquant, Loic J.D. (1992) Towards a Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bourdieu. *Sociological Theory*, 7 (1), 26-63.
- Warr, Peter G. (1993) The Thai Economy. In P.G. Warr (Ed.) *The Thai Economy in Transition*. Cambridge: Cambridge Uni Press, 1-81.
- Wedel, Yuangrat, & Wedel, Paul (1987) *Radical Thought, Thai Mind: The Development of Revolutionary Ideas in Thailand*. Bangkok: Assumption Business Administration College.
- Whittaker, Andrea (1995) Isaan Women: Ethnicity, Gender and Health in Northeast

- Thailand. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- Wignaraja, Ponna (Ed.). (1993a) *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*. London: Zed.
- (1993b) Rethinking Development and Democracy. In Ponna Wignaraja (Ed.) *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*. London: Zed Books, 4-35.
- Williams, Raymond (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wit Thiengburanatham (1996) *Thai-English Dictionary*. Bangkok: Ruamsan.
- Wolin, Sheldon (1992) What revolutionary action means today. In Chantal Mouffe (Ed.) *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*. London: Verso, 240-253.
- World Bank (1994) *Pak Mun: The Facts The Background Questions & Answers*. Bangkok: World Bank.
- Yearly, Steven (1994) Social Movements and Environmental Change. In Michael Redclift & Ted Benton (Eds.) *Social Theory and the Global Environment*. London: Routledge, 150-168.