

# Grassroots Movements in Thailand: The Case of the Assembly of the Poor

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“We are poor. . . . We have no money, no power, no arms, no honor nor prestige and position. . . . We have only feet, we must get together; the more and the longer, the better, so that they [the power that be] will listen to us. The rally is the only source of our power.” An AOP representative at a political rally, January 2, 1997.

“Protest is a political resource of the powerless.” Michael Lipsky, 1968.

## Structural Causes of the Activism in Grassroots Movements

### *Socio-economic causes*

The emergence of people’s movements in Thailand in recent years is a result of the neoliberal development policies of the Thai State. This has been the cause of polarized development: the concentration of income and wealth in a social, political, and economic elite on the one hand, and the marginalization (social exclusion) of the majority of the population on the other. (See Chart 1) This can be seen especially in 1992, a year in which inequality of per capita welfare in Thailand reached a peak of 49.9, according to the Gini index, the most widely used measure of inequality. In 1992, the top 20 percent of households commanded a major share (55.6 percent) of the per capita welfare. The share of the poorest or those in the bottom 20 percent was a paltry 4.5 percent. Considering poor people in general (those in the bottom 40 percent), their share was only 12.4 percent, which compared unfavorably to the figure of 14.2 percent in 1988. (NESDB, 1999: 5). Although several studies point to a decline in the share of population under the poverty line, from 17.9 million people in 1988 to 7.9 in 1998, it is noticeable that the so-called poverty line was defined rather low, being a per capita monthly income of 473 bath in 1988 and 991 baht in 1998. (Ibid., p. 2) This definition tends to show a smaller proportion of the population under the poverty line. The study also pointed out that levels of inequality in Thailand have been “increasing monotonically since mid-1970s. This has resulted in Thailand having the highest inequality in the East-Asian region (even higher than in Malaysia and Philippines).” (Ibid., p. 6) This testifies to the fact that the process of marginalization has been taking place in Thailand for almost a quarter of a century. As the criteria to

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Editor’s Note: This Paper describes the situation of Thai grassroots movements, such as the Assembly of the Poor, in 1998. It should be noted that many changes have taken place since that time.

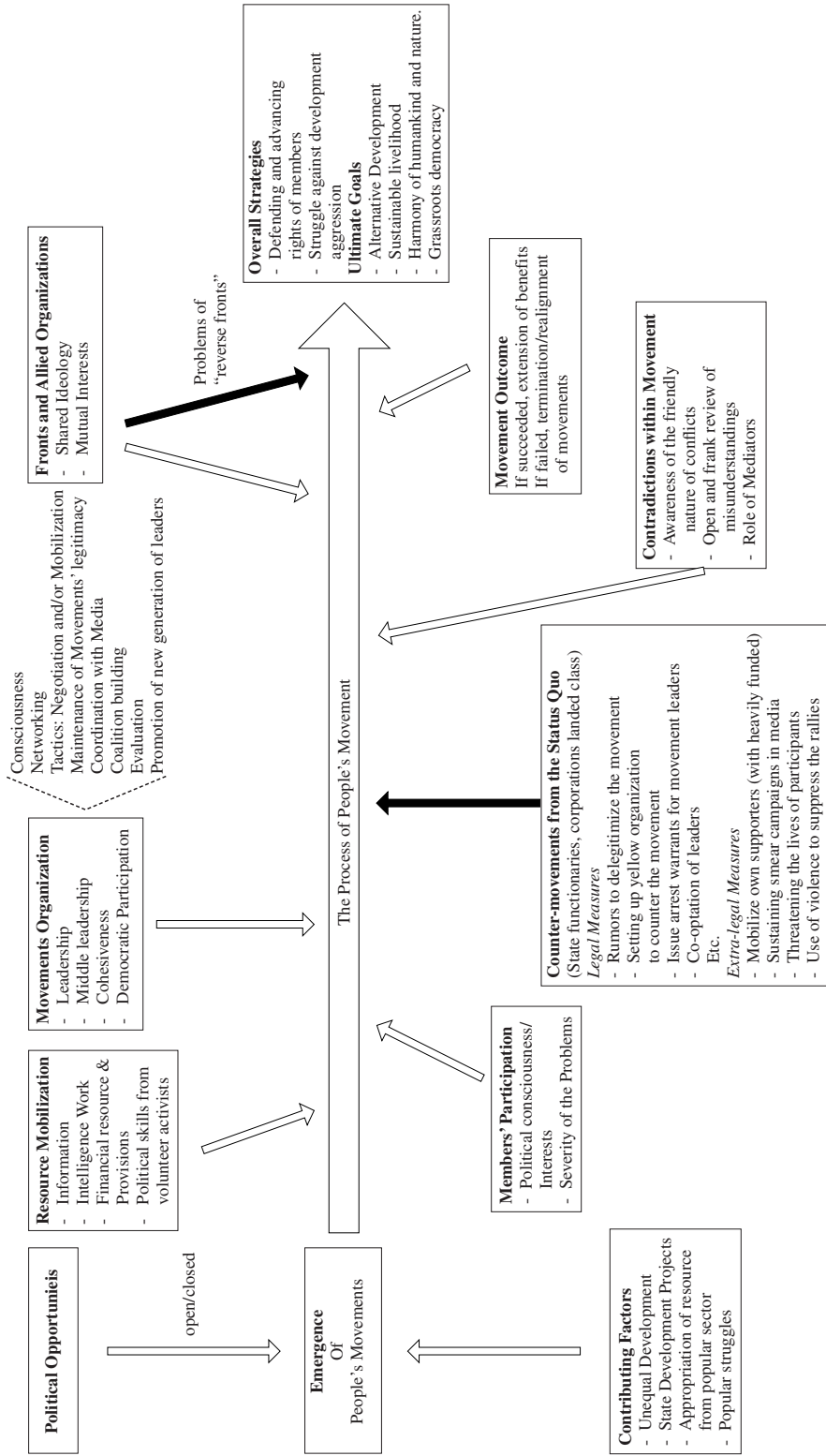


Chart 1 The Process of People's Movement

Source: Prasartset (1997)

determine the poverty line is debatable, we can safely state that more than ten million people, mostly the rural and urban poor, constitute the great majority of the poor in Thailand. These people have been marginalized by a process of urban-biased development pursued by the Thai government during the last three decades. Although it has also been reported that inequality has improved somewhat since 1992, the economic crisis beginning in mid-1997 has reversed this trend. (Ibid.)

There is no denying that the Thai State's development policies have also brought about the rise of a middle class and the growth of big business groups. Nonetheless, for the marginalized or socially excluded social classes, especially the participants of the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), such a development process was referred to as "development aggression." For them, the process of marginalization also meant displacement and pauperization, caused by various mega projects pursued by the state and by the corporate sector. By "development aggression" is meant the kind of development that displaces, marginalizes, and impoverishes people. More often, it also involves various state measures that violate basic human rights. Large-scale government projects such as dams, reservoirs, highways, provincial airports, new provincial centers, and other mega projects have displaced countless numbers of peasant farmers and jeopardized several rural and urban communities. In a similar vein, agribusiness projects, notably Eucalyptus plantations, golf courses and resorts, have displaced people and their communities as they require vast tracts of land. The small peasant landowners have often been forced, sometimes in the face of physical threats, to sell their lands. The incidence of such forced evictions has increased markedly. (Prasartset, 1996)

#### *Political Opportunity Structure and Activation of Grassroots Movement*

Thailand had experienced a long period under authoritarian rule. The first wave of activity by grassroots movements occurred between 1973 and 1976, the short period after a student movement that led to the overthrow of a dictatorial regime. During these three years, peasants and workers, with the support and coordination of student activists, organized several demonstrations and protest rallies to voice their grievances and demands for state action to redress their problems. However, this brief democratic period was followed by the October 6 military coup in 1976. The vicious right-wing suppression of mass activities drove countless numbers of students, farmers, workers and social activists to flee to the jungle. This gave the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) an unprecedented boost in its "revolutionary struggle" in the late 1970s.

To contain this thriving underground movement led by the CPT, the power elite decided to carry out a certain degree of political liberalization. The new Constitution, promulgated in 1979, gave rise to what might be called a semi-democratic regime. This particular regime type was characterized by a sharing of power between the military and business groups through the latter's influence and control of political parties. By this political arrangement the military was in direct control of the ap-

pointed Senate and the political parties were left to contest among themselves for the control of the Lower House through national elections. In spite of the rising political role of business groups, the technocrats were given a prominent role in policy formulation. (See Samudavanija, 1995) The press and other mass media were also given more freedom, although some restrictive clauses were maintained.

Since early 1980, under the eight-year rule of Prime Minister (General) Prem, supported by a shifting coalition of political parties, the popular sector began to regain some degree of political activation. The backlog of their complaints and grievances began to spur an increasing number of protest activities. Prapas Pintoptang (1998: 121) has shown that during a period of more open political space, the frequency of protests and rallies increased sharply. His tally of the annual number of people's protests reported in local newspapers is noted in the paragraph below.

In 1967, when Thailand was under the complete control of the military, there were reported only two cases of protest rallies. By contrast, during 1975/76, the period of struggle between the military and the student movements, the number rose to 153. This dropped to 42 during the brief return of extreme right-wing government. With a renewed political liberalization under the so-called semi-democratic regime, the number of popular protest activities had consistently increased from 61 in 1982 and reached 170 in 1990. In the 1990s, with a higher degree of democratization in Thai politics, the number of various forms of protests and demonstrations has grown sharply, topping 739 in 1994 followed by a surge to 1,200 in 1997. (Ibid.) Thus, we can say that the 1990s was a period of mass mobilization and activation of grassroots movements. Such a process was further spurred by a political system that did not function to serve popular demands.

### *Dysfunction of the Political System*

As marginalized people, the poor often lack effective channels of interest representation. After the parliamentary election had been established, the popular sector had pinned their hope on the political parties to solve their problems. However, after a few years of experience with these new political institutions, their hopes came to naught. The political parties, as a mediating structure between the state and the popular sector, were increasingly delegitimized by their involvement in money politics, internal power struggles, and incapacity to serve their own constituencies. Political parties came mainly to be under the influence of corporate groups. They tended to ignore the problems and grievances of the vast majority of the people. In general, we can say that there was weak state capacity to force the bureaucracy to implement programs for the poor.

In consequence, the marginalized people, both urban and rural, increasingly felt that elections failed to serve their interests. Many came to realize that they had to rely on their own efforts. Popular organization was necessary to stake their claims on the state, and to defend or to advance their rights.

The socio-political process leading to the rise of social movements is more or less

similar in Thailand and in other South and Southeast Asian countries. The context which gave rise to a decline of the party system and to social movements and 'grass-roots' politics is where "the engines of growth are in decline, the organized working class is not growing, the process of marginalization is spreading, technology is turning anti-people, development has become an instrument of the privileged class, and the State has lost its role as an agent of transformation, or even as mediator, in the affairs of civil society." (Kothary 1988) With this, according to Kothary, "democracy had become the playground for growing corruption, criminalization, repression and intimidation for large masses of the people whose very survival is made to depend on their staying out of the political process and whose desperate economic state incapacitates them from entering the regular economic process as well." (Ibid., 41) The socio-political situation in Thailand during the past few years bears close resemblance to this general argument.

In response to state oppression and hopelessness in formal political institutions, there has emerged a "massive response, the rise in consciousness, and the taking to the streets by all sectors of the population organized around specific demands. . . . The people are organizing themselves more often into social movements rather than into political parties, . . . Their demands are tied to material needs, social justices, liberty, land, wages, water, light, food, health, identity, equality, and so many other emblazoned with popular content." (Nunez 1989)

In this regard, a diversity of social movements have sprung up to challenge the established structure of exploitation in spite of limited political space and severe repression. These emerging social movements can be viewed as autonomous (non-party) political formations. By their very nature, these movements represent "attempts to open alternative political spaces outside the usual arenas of party and government (though not outside the state), as new forms of organization and struggle meant to rejuvenate the state and to make it once again an instrument of liberation from exploitative structures." (Kothary 1983)

### **The Rise of the Assembly of the Poor**

With a continuing open political space since the late 1980s, a diversity of protest movements have sprung up to challenge the established structure of domination and exploitation. Thailand's export-oriented growth continued strongly in these years, causing vast tracts of farmland in the countryside to be transformed into industrial estates, tourist resorts, golf courses and Eucalyptus plantations and other agri-business projects. This process developed into a national resource conflict as large-scale eviction of farmers from their lands, often with violation of human rights, caused the rapid collapse of rural communities. (Prasartset, 1996: 5–6; Thabchumpon, 1997: 35–36) Given opening in the political space, such a situation brought about numerous protest rallies in various parts of the country. These local movements had later align themselves into provincial and regional networks. The formation into larger networks was based on the similarity of problems suffered by the people involved. Several of

these networks and some other loosely organized protest groups further formed themselves into the Assembly of the Poor as a nation-wide network, with several member organizations. This development can be seen from some cases as follows:

- May 1991: Seven people's organizations in the Northeast started a campaign against a draft government bill to set a national agricultural council as it did not truly represent the voice of the poor farmers.
- June-July 1992: Northeast Farmers' Assembly campaigned against the so-called Land Allocation Scheme for the Poor (*Khor-jor-khor*), organized by a military internal security office. This scheme, even in its early phase, had displaced several thousand families from their villages and communities.
- February-March 1993: Farmers and fisherfolks affected by the construction of Pakmool Dam started a protest against its construction.
- March 1993 onwards: Several groups of farmers in the Northeast, who suffered from low prices of their products or from failure from government-promoted farming projects, staged a prolonged protest in several provincial towns and later merged into a regional network under Small Farmers' Assembly of the Northeast.

After a few years of struggle at various levels, these organizations from the northeast and other parts of the country reached a joint understanding to form a national coordinating network under the Assembly of the Poor (*Smatcha Konjon*). The AOP was established on 10 December, 1995, a symbolic day as it was Thailand's Constitution Day as well as International Human Rights Day. Starting with a day-long symposium on problems of the poor and violations of human rights at Thammasat University, participants moved on to Pakmool Dam, Khongjiam District, bordering on Southern Laos, where they drew up the Pakmool Declaration on 15 December, 1995. (AOP, 1997: 8–13).

The founding groups included representatives from several peoples' organizations (POs) and networks from Thailand. Foreign solidarity groups from six countries also joined them, namely: farmers' organizations from Australia, Cambodia India, Japan, Malaysia and South Korea, whose respective representatives had endorsed the declaration.

### **AOP Movement Goals**

According to one AOP document, the AOP is a common platform of the oppressed people who share the same faith. Almost all of them are affected by a process of development aggression committed in the name of national development imposed/manipulated by either the state or private sector. AOP is also a venue for mutual learning and exchanges of ideas and experiences among the grassroots people towards a resolution of their problems both local and structural levels. As such, the AOP was launched to "pursue their collective struggle for legitimate rights, and social justice." Other related goals, both immediate and long-term, included the struggle for:

- Land rights for both rural and urban poor (also fishing grounds).
- Customary rights to resources of communities.

- Sustainable or alternative agriculture.
- People-centered development policies
- Upholding agriculture as a mainstay of Thai society
- Political reform including the reform of the bureaucracy.
- Participatory democracy or grassroots democracy

It will be seen that the goals of AOP range from demands for immediate benefits, such as various rights relating to livelihood, to demands which are beneficial to society at large (e.g. political reform). The AOP contends that the rights of the local people that constitute basic human rights and form the foundation of political rights have been violated. Therefore, the AOP proposed that popular political participation and customary rights serve as “a common goal for all peasantry in order to uphold their rights, freedom, justice and peace in Thai society.” (Thabchumpon, 1997: 37). In general, we can also say that the AOP is highly critical of the state’s growth-oriented development policies. As the Pakmool Declaration put it: “The people always become merely the ‘commodity’ or ‘raw materials’ for the production process to feed factories for the sake of ‘Economic Growth’ and achieving ‘Newly Industrialized’ status from which ordinary people never benefit.” As a result, the AOP demanded that “the People must decide” on the direction on national development and their own future, and reaffirmed that the people must be the real beneficiaries of the development process. The poor must also participate in decision-making in development projects that have a bearing on their lives. In addition, the AOP is emphatically against mono-cropping and chemical farming.

Since its establishment, the AOP had been actively involved in proposing various clauses in the drafting process of the new constitution, which was promulgated in late 1997. Based on their bitter experiences with local bureaucrats, the AOP also campaigns strongly for the reform of bureaucracy and decentralization and for the state to genuinely support civil and political rights as well as human rights and cultural rights. AOP’s active participation in these latter campaigns distinguishes it as a new social movement. (See della Porta and Diani, 1999: 11–13 and Foweraker, 1995: 40–45)

### **AOP Organization**

AOP is a coordinating network of several local and regional POs and networks of people suffering from “development aggression.” While some member organizations have been in existence for several years before joining the AOP (e.g. Slum Organizations for Democracy), others were established only recently (e.g. Network of Industrial Hazard Patients).

As shown in Chart 2, AOP is composed of 6 networks of local issues, namely: the people affected by the dam projects, the land and forest conflicts, government infrastructure projects, urban poor, workers affected by industrial hazards, and alternative agriculture. In addition, a network of Southern small fisherfolk has joined activities of the AOP informally at most rallies since 1997. Each of the six major networks has its own working committee with representatives of various groups of local issues.



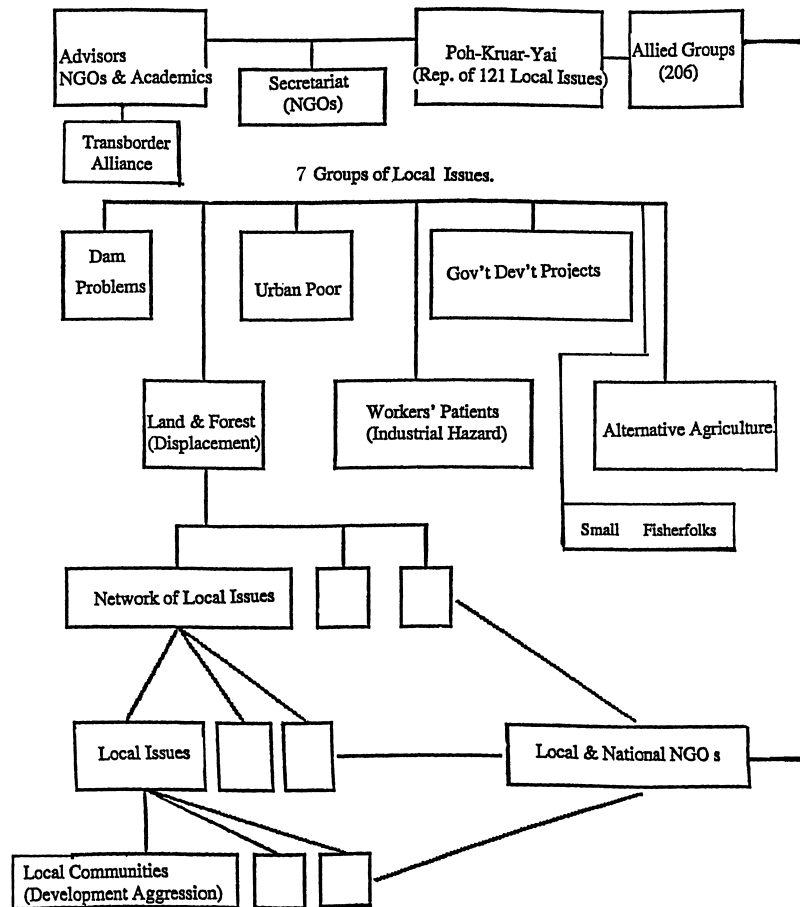


Chart 2 Organizational Structure of Assembly of the Poor

The supreme decision-making body of AOP is the Conference of Poh-Kruar-Yai, “the big chefs,” comprising core representatives from each local issue. At the moment there are 121 formal representatives from all six networks. Each network holds its separate meeting to formulate solutions to problems and to formulate relevant policy proposals to the government. These resolutions and policy proposals are then submitted to the Conference of Poh-Kruar-Yai for final deliberation and approval. The outcome of negotiations with the government is well explained to the various groups and their critical views are widely discussed. Through this process, we can see that the AOP has adopted a collective leadership and decentralized decision-making process.

In addition to the Poh-Kruar-Yai, there is the Conference of AOP Advisors, comprising experienced people’s leaders, NGO workers and some academics. The advisors play a supporting and facilitating role, such as preparing documents and assisting in the negotiation with the government. In addition, they also play a key role in coordinating with transborder allied groups and social movements.



A small secretariat office to coordinate all activities of AOP is assisted by an NGO, Friends of the People. The secretariat is involved with three major functions: a) coordinating AOP movement activities and following up of relevant government implementation; b) coordinating policy and legal reform campaigning of the six AOP networks; and c) general secretariat work, especially in resource mobilization. During the movement activities of the AOP, the leaders of various local issues are responsible for their own food supplies and necessary expenses and take care of the security of the compound they occupy, usually through volunteer youth groups. This self-reliant effort is also supplemented by donations from allied groups.

In its general campaigns and protest movements, the AOP is supported by about 200 allied groups, comprised mostly of NGOs and other mass organizations, student organizations, pro-democracy groups and certain professional groups, notably lawyers and teachers.

By combining their political resources and organizational, campaigning and negotiating skills, the AOP structure can be said to be an embodiment of the law of synergy, whereby the interaction among its constituent parts results in greater overall strength than the sum of each separate part. In the early 1990s, there emerged several groups of protests which called for government price support for certain farm products (e.g. pigs, tapioca) and demands for compensation of the loss incurred by government-promoted programs (e.g. cashew planting and cattle-raising). They learned from experience that their bargaining power was weak when they acted separately. Therefore, by several rounds of joint discussion and sharing of each group's experiences, they decided to form a coordinating network to stage a unified struggle, thus giving them much greater bargaining power.

One such example is the formation of the Small Farmers Assembly of the Northeast in June 1993. The establishment of AOP in 1995 also followed this example to achieve the synergy effect. This process amounts to what may be called "political innovation" on the part of the marginalized people and their allies.

### **Strategy and Tactics**

In its demands for state action to redress problems and change certain policies, the AOP has consistently resorted to a strategy of collective mobilization, supplemented by negotiation. In line with the strategy of most social movements, AOP's use of public protest gave it a distinct characteristic, as opposed to any "conventional style of political participation." (Della Porta & Diani, 1999: 15–16) However, where appropriate, the AOP also resorts to lobbying politicians and relevant authorities. In most cases, it either organizes a rally in relevant provincial cities and/or several protest groups directly converge on the Government House and occupy a rallying space nearby in order to press their demands, attract public attention and initiate a negotiation process. To maintain the legitimacy of the movement mobilization, the AOP leadership has been careful not to cause undue public inconvenience. In this respect, it has vowed to adhere to the principle of non-violence.

During rallies, press conferences were called in order to explain specific problems to the public and how people had suffered from state and corporate measures and what demands and policy proposals they sought. Seminars or round table discussions of people's problems were also jointly organized with some academic institutions. Moreover, allied groups and networks lent a helping hand by organizing a festival-cum-rallying for public information and fund-raising.

In carrying out successful negotiations, it was important to negotiate from strength. In this case, the networks concerned needed to be well equipped with necessary information, media co-ordination, and certain forms of lobbying and negotiating skills. Equally important was the command of the logic of numbers, as numbers implies strength. There appears to be a positive relationship between bargaining strength and the number of people involved in the rally and its duration. As Wanida Tantivithayapitak, an advisor of AOP put it:

“If a few of us come here, we will only meet a security guard in front of the Government House; 10–20 and we will meet a secretary of Public Service Center; 100 or so, we will meet a secretary of a minister; If we come in a thousand, a deputy minister would come to see us; if we are ten thousand strong, the Prime Minister would start a negotiating table. If we want him to visit us here, we must come in twenty thousands.” (Quoted in Pintoptaeng, 1998: 152)

Through their experiences in the struggle, AOP participants have concluded that without the pressure of the protest rally, the government and bureaucrats, both in Bangkok and in the provinces, tended to ignore their demands. Even when the government agreed to solve certain groups of problems as a result of prolonged negotiation, the implementation at a local level in most cases has to be speeded up by a protest rally.

### **Movement Outcome**

Four aspects relating to the outcome of the AOP movement may be emphasized. First, although a number of AOP demands on the Thai state have yet to be fulfilled, it has achieved certain tangible gains such as compensation for some groups in the network. It also succeeded in reconfirming the rights of displaced peasants to return to their villages and make use of the disputed lands, pending final decision by the government. In addition, the AOP has also demanded certain institutional and legal arrangements such as a revolving fund for retraining and adjustment for new occupations, and the establishment of a workers' health hazard protection institute. Several draft acts have been proposed: e.g. the community forest act, which seeks to protect local plant varieties and biodiversity, the slum development act, the right to information act. (AOP, 21–33) These latter demands fall within a framework of policy advocacy activities to be undertaken in alliance with other social movements. Hopefully, these campaigns and struggles will confer long-lasting social benefits for the popular sector in general.

Second is the activation of social movements. As people suffering from state and

corporate projects are made aware of the example of AOP protest rallies through the media, including television, radio, and newspapers, they begin to form their own groups to struggle at the local level. Some of these groups have come to join with the AOP or ask for advice from the AOP. In a sense, AOP activities have contributed to the emergence and maintenance of people's movement, an indispensable aspect of the process of democratic consolidation in Thailand. AOP's campaigning in collaboration with other social movements has played a crucial role in strengthening civil society in Thailand.

Third, the activities of the AOP and its organizational members have given rise to the emergence of "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense: the movement's own intellectual leaders with political skills, e.g. skills in analysis of political situations, in mobilization and negotiation, and in the articulation of people's problems and grievances.

Moreover, changes can be seen in the personal worldview of individual participants in the AOP, transforming them from submissive and fatalistic peasants to people with self-confidence, assertiveness and self-reliance. Participation became the assertion of their own dignity. This writer was informed by one advisor of the AOP that, after involvement in the movement people wanted to delete the phrase "we have . . . no honor nor prestige" from the quotation noted at the beginning of this paper. AOP participants became conscious of their personal honor and dignity as a human being. In addition, they discovered a collective identity: *Samutcha Konjon* or the Assembly of the Poor. This can be seen from the fact that the peasants and workers joining the AOP are so proud of their affiliation and that they are not reluctant to reveal their association with the AOP. The logo of the AOP as a symbol of collective identity is displayed on their houses. However, while a few hundred of AOP participants have taken on this new personality, most are still at the beginning stage of such a process, which is a potentially a transformative experience.

Finally, as a direct consequence of the above, the AOP has been instrumental in a process which might be termed "political diffusion," or the diffusion of popular political activities. This is a process by which several experienced local leaders are able to act as advisors or resource persons for other groups of people suffering from the devastating impact of state and corporate projects.

After some years of participation in protest movements with the AOP or in its member organizations before joining with the AOP both at local and national levels, several local leaders managed to acquire the following capabilities: systematic collection of relevant data; analysis of local problems and formulate strategy of protests; preparation of documents and necessary evidence in support of particular demands; skill in mobilization and negotiation with government officials. Equally important has been their ability to lead a local organization and social network. In fact, it can be said that the local leaders managed to master what Tarrow (1994: 19) calls "the modular repertoire," or the collective action routines which can be "employed across wide territories, broad social sectors and for different kinds of issues."

Such a repertoire of collective actions can be transferred to other communities suffering from similar problems as is shown in Chart 3. Given the diffusion of information through various kinds of media and even word of mouth, the activities of the AOP at the national and local level have been brought to the attention of the public, especially in villages surrounding those within the AOP network. Communities facing similar problems have turned to AOP leaders for advice to start their own protest movement or in some case to join in AOP network of local issues (e.g. land rights and community forests at Pa Dong Lann Forest) (For details, see Noparatvarakorn, 1998, 148–156)

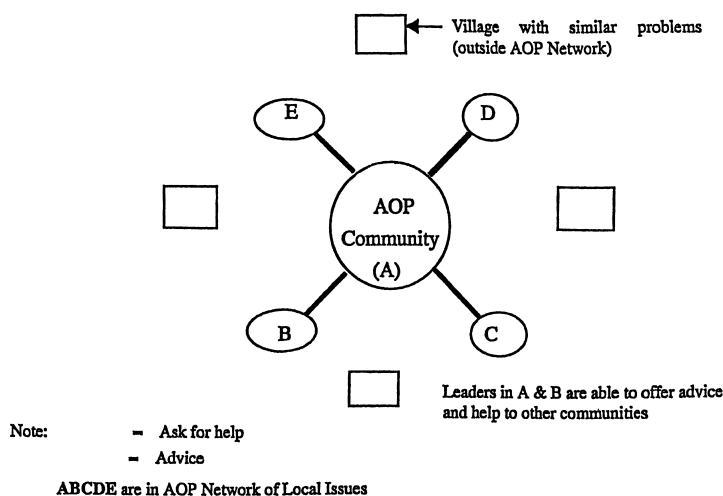


Chart 3 Political Diffusion  
(Political Technology Transfer)

### Some Problems

Every movement has its own internal contradictions. The crucial point is whether these will develop into severe antagonisms that may place the entire movement in jeopardy. (See Chart 1 showing contradictions within the movement). In spite of many achievements, it may be said that there are several problems that need to be tackled collectively. The following are some of the problems facing the AOP.

First, as information about the AOP as an active movement for the poor has been disseminated via national media, several groups or communities suffering from similar problems with those in an AOP network want to join the AOP. However, the number of these groups is beyond the capacity of the AOP to manage in terms of experienced persons to take charge of all aspects of the new cases. At the moment there are some 30 such groups who are not yet admitted into the AOP formal structure but are allowed to attend relevant meeting as observers. Some of these even came to join the protest rallies with AOP. It seems that the AOP is reaching the limit of a fixed proportion of movement activities to its key workers, especially in terms of the num-

ber of its advisors and peasant leaders. However, this problem can be tackled through the process of political technology transfer mentioned above.

Second is the issue of personality clashes among the core groups, which often recur after having been temporarily resolved. At present, there are some cases of misunderstandings among the core group. (I avoid using the term “conflict”). What is at issue is not so much competition for leadership as problems of working styles stemming from different personal political experiences. The following are some examples:

- Some leaders are more militant while others are more compromising. While this type of difference in a certain situation may become a liability for the movement, it is considered an asset by some leaders as the airing of different views will produce a better decision.
- Differences regarding analysis of a situation pertaining to decisions when to launch protest mobilization and when to demobilize and “return home with honor and victory.”
- Misunderstandings regarding some persons in the core group inadvertently joining a certain kind of activity in the name of the AOP instead of doing so in the name of their own organization.

Another important problem is that there are still large gaps in understanding the linkages between the local and structural problems between AOP advisors on the one hand and some peasant leaders and participants on the other. This is the problem of micro-macro linkages which is always present in political movements. However, this problem may be gradually resolved in the process of the struggle as peasants become disillusioned with the law enforcement of local officials and appreciate the need to campaign on behalf of structural reform. The active participation of AOP participants in a series of discussions leading to the final draft of the Community Forest Act is one successful case, deriving primarily from their concrete understanding of local experiences. However, more efforts and consciousness-raising need to be carried out regarding reform at structural levels and in AOP’s trans-border solidarity activities.

Judging from past activities, the AOP has accumulated much experience in what may be labeled as *Ngarn-ron* (literally “hot work”). This includes mobilization and organizing for protest rallies and demonstrations to pressure the government into negotiation. It also involves demanding fair compensation for state actions that cause distress as well as preventing certain environmentally destructive projects. Such activities also promote coalition building and include campaign activities in terms of advocacy with other social forces. The latter activities are naturally less “hot” as they involve continuous and careful coalition building and lobbying.

Core group members have admitted that they still lack the capability to carry on *Ngarn-yen* (“cold work”), i.e. to carry on various activities at the community level to strengthen their members’ economic base. They realize that they need to give more effort to help alleviate members’ economic problems and carry out local activities to deepen the consciousness and commitment of local participants. It is expected that the participation of the Alternative Agriculture Network in the AOP since 1997 will help

bolster the local *Ngarn-yen* aspects of the AOP in the future. In like manner, at the national level the Alternative Agriculture Network is responsible for proposing draft bills to the government for the benefits of the peasantry.

Finally, as the history of various social movements has shown, we cannot discount the possibility that the AOP might break up or fade away in the future. In other words, the AOP as a social movement organization might follow a pattern similar to a protest cycle as expounded by Sidney Tarrow (1994: ch. 9). If that is the case, it is still reasonable to believe that each member organization will be able to act as an independent network by itself to defend and advance the interests of their member, as well as supporting alternative social goals.

The bond of friendship and comradeship for most of participants from different parts of the country will still be maintained, at least on a personal basis. Insofar as the people's problems still remain unattended by the state, it is expected that some kind of grassroots movement will emerge again under a new concrete situation within a given political opportunity structure.

More important is the existence of a community of social activists, mostly comprising former student activists, who are ready to offer their help to a genuine protest movement. They have the experience and political skills to organize such a movement, and carry out negotiations and lobbying activities. These social activists come from different occupational background, mostly from NGOs and POs, small businesses, and professional groups such as teachers, lawyers, medical doctors and academics. When a situation of *Ngarn-ron* arises, they are certain to lend their support and assistance to such a movement. Their involvement is akin to a kind of *Ngarn-boon* or a community's cultural function with spontaneous and voluntary help from the neighborhood, according to each person's skills and availability without anyone in command.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of these problems confronting the AOP, we can arrive at the following conclusions: First, the AOP movement might be considered as "counter-hegemonic" in the sense that it confronts the mainstream development policies of the Thai State. AOP has pressured the Thai State to take measures to redress acute social inequalities or to change its policies and the existing state-people relationship in the direction of genuine popular participation.

The next point is that AOP activities may be likened to direct political actions that contribute significantly to the political activation of the popular sector. As such, AOP is prominent among Thai social movements aiming to strengthen civil society and working towards achieving grassroots democracy. Judging from its activities, we can say that the AOP has contributed to a redefinition of politics as something beyond the ballot box. AOP participants want to achieve democracy that is able to solve their problems or, in the words of AOP leaders, "democracy that they can eat." Furthermore, AOP has proven itself to be an autonomous social force, forming, as it is, a kind



of non-party political formation. It has succeeded in building alliances with other voluntary organizations, networks and social groups. AOP may be said to pursue a strategy of trans-class alliances

Another important point is that the rise and consolidation of the AOP can be designated as a form of “political innovation: by a popular movement, based on the principle of “political synergy.” AOP’s activities offer participants a kind of “political technology transfer,” which is able to greatly bolster the process of people empowerment. Its decentralized organizational structure and collective leadership are instrumental in strengthening and ensuring its sustained development.

Finally, the AOP can be considered as a new social movement or grassroots movement: it has a structure with informal networking and autonomy; it does not contest for state power and it transcends the confines of parochial interests. Moreover, it adopts a trans-class alliance in the quest for alternative development or alternative modes of collective life by participating with other social forces in the struggle for political reform, human rights, social justice, gender justice and ecological sustainability. In sum, the AOP is the major political movement in Thailand that represents the hopes and aspirations of the poor.

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