

Food Insecurity in Thailand during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract: Food insecurity is a reality for millions of people around the world and affects even relatively affluent populations such as those found in urban Bangkok in Thailand. It is anticipated that the ongoing coronavirus pandemic will have intensified the presence of food insecurity both in the initial closedown that prevented food from entering the city but, also, in the longer term as the economic damage has intensified across the country. This raises questions about the extent to which people are experiencing food insecurity and how are they dealing with it. In particular, what level of resilience are people showing in response to the crisis? A qualitative research program of personal interviews was organized to explore these issues. Content analysis revealed that the sample was responding to these issues in a manner generally predicted by the existing research but with the addition of a non-technical form of mindful meditation we have called 'everyday fatalism.' The paper contributes to awareness of food insecurity in Thailand during the coronavirus period and an understanding of the adaptability of people in a Buddhist society dealing with hardship. The spiritual element of life is present in becoming resilient according to how respondents describe their experiences.

Keywords: *Coronavirus, everyday fatalism, food insecurity, mobility, Thailand.*

1. Introduction

Previous research (Walsh & Maneepong, 2012, Walsh, 2016)) indicated that food insecurity at various levels could be found within Thailand in both urban and rural locations. In urban locations, food insecurity associated with poverty could be found in pockets across the city, as well as more generally in some slum areas. Low-income people tended to see themselves as part of a household in which all members would contribute on a pragmatic, day-by-day basis depending on what opportunities may be available (Rimmer & Dick, 2009). In Bangkok, in common with most of the country, people found it a little easier to survive because of the availability of fresh food cooked to order on the city's many street markets and from mobile street vendors (Maneepong & Walsh, 2013; Walsh & Maneepong, 2012). However, complex supply chains link food items grown in the countryside and consumed in the cities and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic had put those artifacts under unprecedented pressure. This requires people to demonstrate resilience in stressful situations. Overall, the Thai GDP contracted by 6% in 2020 and large numbers of workers lost their jobs, particularly in the tourism and related service sectors (IMF, 2021). Up to 60% of households of low-income families experienced problems with food insecurity and had to resort to resilience strategies to cope with the situation (World Bank, 2021). Are the means of coping consistently among households of different countries?

Some research has suggested that Thai society produces people with a distinctive response to the need for resilience but most of the studies related to elderly (i.e., 60+) people in rural areas which may have been undergoing change but had not yet reached the state of being diversified, contemporary agriculture and agro-industrial sites that many parts of rural Thailand have now become. Has the nature of Thai resilience, if there is such a thing, been the same now as it was in the past and does resilience have the same meaning in urban Bangkok as it does in other parts of the country? To investigate these issues, a program of qualitative research based on personal interviewing was conducted to understand the extent to which food insecurity had changed as a result of the pandemic and how people were able to cope with it, assuming that they were indeed coping with it. This paper describes the research and the lessons learned from it. It contributes to an understanding of household strategies when dealing with environmental shocks from a comparative perspective. The paper is organized in a standard fashion. The next section concerns the literature review and highlights the knowledge gap that is being addressed by the research. This is followed by a discussion of the method employed to gather and analyze data, a description of the findings obtained and a discussion of the

meaning of those findings in the context of the gap in knowledge identified in the literature review. A conclusion and list of references employed complete the paper.

2. Literature Review

Resilience: The most commonly used concept to describe responses to difficult conditions is resilience, which is "... the complexities of individual and group responses to traumatic and challenging situations (Aburn, Gott & Hoare, 2016). Resilience is used by individuals and households as well as larger systems such as cities and societies as a whole. Partly to avoid the temptation to incorporate some form of imagined moral worth into the measure of resilience, researchers have tended to focus on a list of observables, objective measures, such as access to water and needed resources, access to credit and markets and so forth (Alinovi, Mane & Romano, 2008). This approach has become extremely important in development studies, where it has been used to distinguish between households and regions in countries facing poverty (d'Errico, Romano & Pietrelli, 2018) or reasonably predictable natural disasters such as flooding in areas prone to that problem (Nguyen & James, 2013). Attempts have also been made along the same lines to enable households and communities to measure their potential level of resilience in advance of unexpected disasters (Arbon et al., 2016). LaLone (2012) argued that, in such cases, more attention should be given to the role of response and recovery contributions provided through informal networks on local levels.

While Joseph et al. (2020) observed the benefits in such circumstances that could arise from empowering local people in knowledge about possible first responses and bottom-up preparation for any eventuality. After the 2011 floods, when more than 700 people in Thailand were killed, some resilience was shown among some sectors of society which, while being effective, was of an ad hoc nature rather than being a coherent institutional response (Ghaderi, Som & Henderson, 2015). O'Tendall et al. (2015) link food security with resilience by pointing out how complex the systems involved are, with many diverse actors and chains of interactions that may have unexpected and unpredictable results. This complexity was revealed by the coronavirus pandemic and resulted in, among other effects, the absence of various types of food from shops and restaurants accustomed to stocking them. Indeed, the severity of the situation provoked problems around the world to an entirely Unpredicted extent (McKinnon et al., 2021). The FAO (2020) noted that many low-income Thai people are likely to be negatively affected by food insecurity as a result of the coronavirus.

Resilience in Thai Society: The social system of Thai society means that elderly people are treated with respect and often included in multi-generational households that help to arm them with greater degrees of personal resilience (Soonthornchaiya, 2020). This has enabled elderly Thai people to be able to 'move on' with their lives, progressing from one situation to the next without having to acknowledge a setback (O'Pathike, O'Brien & Hunter, 2019). Previous work in this area had also indicated that Thai elderly people tended to possess a constellation of ways of thinking that provided them with 0a mental stability in the face of environmental shocks (Maneerat, Isaramalai & Boonyasopun, 2011). Drawing on the practice of Buddhism, Falk (2012) writes about the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and finds that religious explanations of events and the daily enactment of religious processes are generative of resilience in the Thai context.

However, there is always the danger of essentialism in studies of this sort and a comparative study between Thai and Swedish elderly people found almost no differences on a resilience scale (Choowattanapakorn et al., 2010). Resilience can be improved by the presence of stronger linkages in terms of financial and transportation infrastructures to connect people within and across borders. Figures indicate that remittances to Thailand reached record levels at the end of 2021, standing at nearly 19,000 billion THB in November (approximately US\$525 billion) (Trading Economics, 2022). This suggests that physical support for interpersonal networks and its role in promoting resilience has been enabled. However, Porst & Sakdapolrak (2018), meanwhile, note that in the case of Thailand, the role of migration between urban and rural settings in difficult times and its role in promoting resilience is complex and can only be properly understood when bearing in mind several socio-spatial scales simultaneously. These factors rather suggest that resilience that might have been distinctive in different societies would tend to converge over time. This would be, therefore, one symptom of globalization.

The Thai Government's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic: Thailand was badly affected, particularly because of the closure of the country and its impact on the tourism industry and the extensive nature of the informal sector, although it has benefited from the continuation of the manufacturing industry (IMF, 2021). The Thai government adopted a robust and successful set of public health measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus in the country. Strict border controls were introduced together with a stay-at-home policy and the requirement to use masks outside of the house. Thai people have generally been receptive to social distancing and masking policies, as well as accepting vaccinations when they were made available. Many Thai motorbike riders notoriously refuse to wear helmets (Meneghella & Walsh, 2018) but are content to wear masks, while their use has been common on public transport for people not wishing to spread infection from flu or colds for some years. Major outbreaks of the disease are associated with specific events and locations, often tied to foreign migrant workers or other means of transmission from overseas (Rajatanavin et al., 2021).

Subsequent public health management issues adopted a differentiated approach depending on the province, with Bangkok one of the regions designated as part of the most severe 'deep red' area. However, despite the success of the strategy in limiting domestic transmission for some months, the price in terms of economic damage was severe. Millions of workers were unable to work and had few sources of government support (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2021). Thailand's economy relies to a considerable extent on tourism and, in its absence, the entire country suffered. People's reserves were drained and people became increasingly concerned about what was to come. Some evidence suggested Thais were the most pessimistic in ASEAN in this regard (Webfact, 2021). Consequently, in October 2021, an official announcement was made that entry quarantine requirements would be phased out and that Thai people would have to learn to live with the virus. In the meantime, the government introduced a number of stimulus measures aimed at reducing the stress on affected workers and distressed businesses (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Employment-Related Measures Taken by the Thai Government to Combat COVID-19

Liquidity for Labor in Affected Industries

Cash support of 5,000 THB for 3 months starting April to June for labor and temporary workers and freelance not registered under the Social Security System (SSS). Individuals under SSS will receive 50% of their previous salary (but not exceeding the maximum salary of 15,000 THB per month if the employer temporarily halts employment)
Cash support of 5,000 THB for 3 months starting May to July for farmers
Special loans of 10,000 THB per person, 0.1% interest, no collateral needed
Special loans of 50,000 THB per person, 0.35% interest, collateral needed
Loans to government pawn shops to further boost liquidity for lower-income citizens
Grace period provided for principal payments and consideration for a reduction in interest per customer for personal loans, hire purchase and leasing loans, house loans, SME loans, microfinance and nanofinance
Measure to Enhance Skills for Workers
Seminar to enhance career skills or to arrange social activities
Social Security Contributions
Liquidity Boosting for Entrepreneurs
SME Loan Restructuring
Adjustment in Roles of Financial Institutions and Banks
Measures to Adjust/Lower Fee Structures

Source: Adapted from KPMG (2020).

Affected people were requested to apply to the relevant government office to request assistance. As 2021 continued, new schemes to permit cost-sharing between the individual and the government in purchasing relatively low-cost local goods and services were made available as apps with online applications possible.

3. Methodology

This project used a qualitative approach featuring in-depth personal interviews, conducted as circumstances permit either in person or by telephone. Respondents were selected by a combination of purposive and

snowball sampling techniques which were intended to reduce the risk of an overly homogenous sample. A semi-structured research agenda was constructed before interviews began based on the gap in knowledge identified in the literature review and related subjects. The agenda was updated during the interviewing process to reflect new knowledge learned, new subjects becoming relevant and some existing issues dropped because of not being relevant. Each conversation was open-ended and allowed to vary to reflect the different issues of importance to the individual respondents. A total of 25 interviews were conducted for this project. Each interview was accompanied by extensive note-taking and then transcription of the notes at the earliest opportunity.

The transcripts were entered into a database together with relevant secondary literature and the notes kept by the researchers during the research period. The contents of the database were then interrogated through content analysis procedures with a mixture of approaches, with in some cases tags obtained from the data and in other cases tags imported from anticipated results. This approach was taken because some knowledge is already available concerning living conditions during the pandemic and other areas were expected to be unique because of a specific location and cultural factors. Findings were divided into main themes and sub-themes and these are presented in the following section. The interviewing took place in June and July 2021, when the lockdown was taking place but vaccinations were beginning to become available for some of the population and before the decision to attempt to re-open the country was taken.

4. Findings

After the content analysis process was completed, the main findings appeared to be grouped into four different areas: food insecurity; mobility crisis; the specter of debt and everyday fatalism. These will be dealt with individually.

Food Insecurity: Thailand's internal infrastructure has been developed to a degree that meant that supply chains within the country were quickly restored after the initial lockdown and fresh food was returned to city centers quite quickly thereafter. This has given people an additional resource in coping with possible food insecurity in that they could buy inexpensive ingredients and cook their food. Most Thai dishes, in addition to steamed or glutinous rice, are quickly cooked in a wok with relatively few ingredients and most households can support themselves this way. There is also a custom of sharing food with family members or friends in their own or other households and this too helps in providing variety. At the time of the research, respondents were still willing to restrict expenditure and simply do without more expensive options for the time being. Further research would be needed to determine whether people will continue this approach indefinitely and, also, whether people with specific nutritional needs are able to cope in the same way.

Those households that were able to cope better with the economic downturn were those who had members in a variety of different occupations, mixing together both the formal and informal sectors. Members of the formal sector were most likely able to receive most if not all of their regular wages and could share these with other household members. Those in the informal sector were able to try different activities on an entrepreneurial basis when required and, if this were not possible or sufficient, then they could follow a strategy of resilience that combined reduced expenditure with the sale of existing assets. In terms of food insecurity, therefore, a significant proportion of the sample had been suffering from this at the milder end of the scale, i.e., they were not able to buy as much of the food that they like to eat as they would if they could. However, this research found only a few cases of food insecurity at a more serious level. This had not yet become an endemic issue in the sample obtained.

Mobility Crisis: Residents of Bangkok who are labor migrants generally have had the opportunity to return to provincial homes where restrictions are often less severely enforced and opportunities exist to share resources with other family and household members. However, permanent residents of Bangkok may have invested resources in their homes and businesses which would be very difficult to abandon even for a limited period of time. One respondent and her family members had a property near Bobae market and a business that kept them so busy that they apparently did not have enough time to eat breakfast. Unfortunately, that business had been declining for some years as customers began to switch to direct buying from Chinese vendors and the closing of the market was a hammer blow to the footfall of what was left. Much of the value of

the property was bound up in its proximity to a bustling market and so they could not afford to sell it at a loss. In common with other vendors, they resorted to an online presence and a delivery service. However, this business model required new skills and competencies they did not possess and, to be competitive.

It was necessary to sign up with a larger delivery company with an online presence that could be trusted by customers and this squeezed their margins further. This typical story indicates a reversal of normal mobility practices. Mobility provides a form of capital and, for mobility justice to occur; it should be spread with an eye to equality (sheller). However, the pandemic has made mobility a danger to all those who practice it and it is now necessary to consider immobility capital – that is, privilege now rests with those who can afford to stay in a (relatively) safe home and order all required goods to be delivered to them by delivery workers who must bear the risk of navigating infected streets and warehouses. Many respondents had suffered from this reversal and it seems likely that the situation will continue, at least to some extent, even after the end of the pandemic, if that day ever comes. Some respondents did identify one positive aspect of this situation if they were able to remain at home in a residence in a decent condition. This is that they could practice social distancing in their homes in a way that they would not have been able to do in the normal circumstances of working away from home. This benefit merged into others: there was less stress arising from dealing with others in the workplace and the opportunity to turn to quietism at home, which appealed to a number of respondents.

The Specter of Debt: In common with many agricultural societies, Thai society developed an unwanted reliance on debt that was unavoidable based on climatic and geographical conditions. The central problem is that farmers earn income only when their crops are harvested (historically, other activities were mainly aimed at household consumption) but the farming family needs money throughout the year for health, education and other expenses. As inputs such as insecticides and chemical fertilizers became popular and widely available, many farmers felt it necessary to buy them on credit and repay the debt at harvest sale time. However, there was the perennial risk of disaster from drought, flood or disease. Farmers in the central region, where two or three harvests per year were possible survived better than their counterparts in northeastern Isan, for example, where the fertility of the land was much lower because of soil quality and reliance on the monsoon. Even today, when subsistence agriculture is much less prevalent than it once was, Thai people have still internalized the fear of debt and potential ruin. Indeed, a new threat now stalks them as the spread of the credit card economy promises a superior lifestyle on the never. As a result, a number of respondents in this sample spoke about their fear of having to take on debt if they were to survive the current ordeal.

One retired military officer reported that he had managed to pay off the debt that had kept him awake at night prior to the pandemic. He, like other respondents, reflected that he could live on very little and would be content to do so as required as long as the debt was not incurred. However, there was concern about institutional failure which could allow the specter to come in through the back door – one respondent, in particular, was worried about a rumor (unconfirmed) that insurance companies would cancel all policies for people who had contracted COVID-19. There was not much trust exhibited in such institutions and, indeed, in the governments to be able to resolve such problems. There was only limited interest in government schemes for support for individuals (most schemes were aimed at the formal sector, where communications are more convenient); although a number of respondents were aware of and had used the Khon La Krueng 50-50 co-payment scheme. It seems this scheme was popular as people were able to use it on household consumption decisions that they would have made anyway. However, some respondents reported that their relatives outside Bangkok had not used the scheme because they did not have money to deposit initially with the app and there was some suspicion of particular vendors. Even so, it was deemed successful in Bangkok at least.

Everyday Fatalism: Buddhist philosophy teaches that all things are impermanent and subject to change and, hence, fatalism in the sense that one's destiny is fixed is not a possibility. However, this is a philosophy that operates over the long term and, for human consciousness, hemmed in by limitations of the sense and the ability of the mind to concentrate, a rational satisfying answer to physical difficulties is simply to accept that such things befall people from time to time and, so, the most reasonable response is to wait for things to improve. Certainly, a number of respondents in this research offered the answer that, since there was nothing, they could do about the situation; they would just put up with it and wait until the bad times ended.

Some respondents appeared to be quite cheerful about this and thought that it represented an opportunity for them to reflect on the blessings they had received and the good things in their lives, while others tended towards a more somber acceptance of the facts. Respondents in this category tended to think that they behaved in the correct way that was indicated in their moral education.

Interestingly, there was not much correlation between everyday fatalism and attitudes toward vaccination. Many people were still waiting for their chance to be vaccinated and only a small number felt they were being made to wait too long or, more specifically, that it was unfair that they had not received the vaccinations while some foreigners had already received theirs. There were also a small number of respondents who were planning not to receive the vaccination, based on rumors they had heard through the internet about possible negative side effects. It is interesting to compare this response with the attitude towards temporal authority. Thai people have become accustomed to practicing self-censorship when dealing with the state, although there have been moments of hope in the C21st that a genuine government of the people would provide the liberty of freedom of expression and of thought. However, the time of research did not coincide with one of those periods and most respondents were reticent about what they said. Even so, it was apparent that there was a certain willingness to dismiss the efforts of 'the government' as a whole rather more than is normally found.

Discussion

In line with the existing research, it is found here that the Bangkok sample was experiencing minor forms of food insecurity as a result of the coronavirus and its impact on economic activity. People whose work was in the informal sector were much more affected than people in the formal sector and had little recourse to government assistance, other than an everyday consumption cost-sharing system. The most common means of dealing with the stress of loss of income and uncertainty over the future was through reducing expenditure and the sale of owned assets. This is consistent with earlier work (e.g., Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Education and health expenditures may be postponed rather than cancelled altogether but the cancellation might come after further exposure to stress – at the time of writing, the emergence of the Omicron variant of the virus was resulting in further restrictions on the movement of people, despite the government's previous announcement that Thailand would in the future learn to live with the virus. Respondents in complex households also demonstrated the sharing of resources and pooling of income from daily changing opportunities that have been predicted by, for example, Rimmer & Dick (2009). Exchanging home-cooked food also provided some variety and additional resilience for informal networks operating from the bottom-up, also supporting the research that suggested that community-based empowerment and systems were likely to be at least as important as top-down implementations, at least in the case of this sample. Where there were variations from mainstream resilience literature is in the issue of the everyday fatalism that seems to stem from Buddhist practice and philosophy.

Respondents had become familiar in their lives with the experience that unfortunate or unpleasant things will happen and that seeking to challenge them only leads to worse circumstances, which is a lesson that is drawn in popular media and social media about political dissidence. As a result, the best approach is to accept and wait. One relevant tool in this approach is through mindful meditation, which is taught in Thai Buddhism and which is credited with a role in keeping calm and rational the twelve Thai boys who were trapped in a flooded underground cave for two weeks (Barclay, 2018). Scientific research into the value of mindful meditation is difficult to assess. However, one meta-analysis concluded that it can "... reduce multiple negative dimensions of psychological stress (Goyal et al., 2014)." It is presumably the case that the lack of numerous interruptions to daily life and the repetition of daily and seasonal routines makes this ability to meditate and hence demonstrate resilience more prevalent among the rural elderly (or else it is an artifact of essentialist thought). That most people do not consciously practice mindful meditation in the prescribed way but are aware of it as part of their sentimental education means that they draw upon it in daily life in the form of everyday fatalism. This is sufficient to help deflect the worst impacts of stress and so is likely to be repeated as required. Claiming that this is how Thai urban citizens customarily behave at times of stress is claimed to be a contribution to knowledge, although it is a claim that will need further testing.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reported on qualitative research conducted with a sample of people in Bangkok during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Qualitative research is very useful in eliciting people's opinions during unprecedented situations such as is currently being faced but is vulnerable to the charge that it can obtain an overly homogeneous sample, especially when convenience and snowball techniques of sample respondent-seeking are employed. Attempts have been made here to avoid this danger by purposively seeking heterogeneous respondents according to demographic characteristics. However, the reader must judge whether sufficient precautions have been taken in this case. Qualitative research is also vulnerable to the charge that analysis and interpretation of data is more subjective than objective in nature and lacking in replicability and generalizability. While these charges have a fundamental substance, it is possible to reduce the risk by careful application of content analysis techniques and the attempt to triangulate observations with independent occurrences.

Again, the reader will be the judge of the success with which this has been achieved here. As the coronavirus continues to menace humanity for another year, there is an ongoing need to investigate its impact on the daily lives of people from all walks of society. Studies are beginning to emerge around the world but it is evident that these mostly relate to specific stages in the development of the pandemic (e.g. the early onslaught, the first lockdown, the new wave and so on) and people in different countries are responding to its continued presence with more or less displays of petulance or patience. At the moment, Thai society is leaning more towards the latter than the former and, although it is far from clear how sustainable this situation may be, it is perhaps inevitable that we reach for the Theravadin Buddhism that so many Thai people profess for explanations. In this paper, the term 'everyday fatalism' has been used to describe how people behave in practice.

Although Buddhist thought rejects the concept of fatalism in its sense of being unable to affect one's teleological existence, it is agreed that in daily life Thai Buddhists will accept an unpleasant or trying situation as being an unavoidable fact of life that will eventually go away of its own accord. It seems likely, although there is a need for additional research to explore this possibility, that everyday fatalism increases in line with the inability of people to effect change in their surroundings or demonstrate agency. In terms of recommendations, it is evident that the government programs that have been put forward have been used and, for many people, are of great value. These should be extended as needed. Clearly, neoliberalism fails people in difficult situations. Many people are able to contribute to helping themselves in promoting resiliency when they have information to do so and this too should be provided – indeed, many Thai government programs have been quite well publicized during this period, especially in urban areas. The urban-rural divide that this reveal should also be considered.

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