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**Empowering Hill Tribe Minorities in Thailand:
Moving Towards a People Centred Approach**

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1. Introduction

The development of marginalised ethnic minorities is one of the major tasks by governments around the world. There is a need to ask to which degree government policies are beneficial for the concerned groups, and if they are solely in favour of the people and do not serve government interests.

The so called Hill Tribe people of the mountains in the north of Thailand are a prime example of twisted development policies, which did not serve primarily the needs of the concerned communities. It has been 60 years since the Thai government actively started to get involved in the development process of its hillside minorities. It was about the same time, that the discourse of development was started by Harry S. Truman and his 1949 inaugural speech. The policies applied over the years mirror the discourse of development theories to a certain extent. These days development aid has arrived in a new age, governments are still at risk to be driven by their particular political interests. Nevertheless NGOs and philanthropists have changed the setup and put the people in the centre of development activities.

This essay looks at the history and development of the minorities in the mountains of Thailand; gives a brief insight into the development discourse of the second half of the 20th century; and finally presents several case studies of modern day development projects. The question which runs throughout the essay will be: does a people centric approach, empower local communities and overcome marginalisation?

2. History, Facts & Figures

The history of developing the northern highlanders in Thailand, or as they are called by the Thai state Hill Tribes, is longstanding and quite ambivalent. Throughout this essay, I will use the term Hill Tribes, as it is the generally recognised term for the people group I look at. Nevertheless I am aware that it is a term created by the Thai government affiliated to several negative stereotypes within Thai society.

The ethnic minorities in northern Thailand, make up a population of round about 750,000 people, thereby they represent slightly more than 1% of the overall population. An in depth analysis would reveal, that it is not appropriate to pool them into one general group. Nevertheless, the term Hill Tribes stands for the nine minor groups: namely Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Lisu, Mien, Akha, Lua, Htin, and Khamu and some other who share similar characteristics (ADB, 2001, p. 5). The first arrival of highlanders on the soil of nowadays Thailand was before the first Tai settlers arrived in the southern plains. Over the centuries and up until the middle of the last, different tribes migrated into Thailand. The later entrants were caused by ethnic conflicts or warfare in their forgone areas of settling

(Buergin, 2000, p. 7). Over the decades, the Hill Tribes and ethnic Thais developed what is often referred to as the hill-valley balance (Vaddhanaphuti, 2005, p. 154). It has been a distinct separation of space of living, a non-interference in each other's affairs and an economic interaction with benefits for both. This traditional interaction, also credited to the ancient form of ruling in Southeast Asia, came to an end as the modern Thai state emerged and with it the need to "control [...] the newly demarcated territory as the state had to make good on the ground what it claimed on the map" (Vaddhanaphuti, 2005, p. 152).

A first **quirk** into the Thai highlander relationship might have been the Thai nationalism developed under Rama VI, emphasizing the three pillars of Thainess, namely: Chat (the Thai people as an ethnic group), Satsana (Buddhism) and Pramahakaset (the Monarchy). None of these the Hill Tribes could relate to. During the post World War II era, the then ruling regime promoted nationalism anew with a nuance of racism (Vaddhanaphuti, 2005, p. 155). It was then, that the Thai state started to problematize its ethnic minorities. Politically it was based upon the aim to protect the country from communist insurgency and the enforcement of the Opium Act, which banned the production, consumption and sale of opium in the kingdom (Gilligly, 2008, p. 123f). Besides that, their lifestyle and cultural practices had been classified as problematic and therefore 'the problem' had to be 'solved'.

3. Developing the Hill Tribes

The approach to develop for Hill Tribes has been diverse, and at this point it is to say, that it not only served to improve their livelihoods. Much more, it was aimed to control and assimilate, to secure the nation, to prevent the production of opium and later on to protect forests and therewith the watersheds (Gilligly, 2008, p. 119).

The Hill Tribe communities had been the producers of opium on which the Thai government had a monopoly for several decades. With the 1958 Opium Act, the government deprived the highland minorities of their livelihood. Nevertheless, the poppies did not vanish over night and cultivation and trade continued illegally and with knowledge and participation of government officials (Gilligly, 2008, p. 124). On the other hand, development projects fostered the opium replacement and police and military actively enforced the new law. Even before opium replacement became a serious issue in the north of Thailand, the Thai government made its first move to control the inhabitants of the mountains. One actor on behalf of the government was the Department of Public Welfare (DPW, part of the Ministry of the Interior), another one was the Border Patrol Police (BPP). The responsibility of the BPP was to secure the borders, and therewith the protection of the nation from a communist insurgency. Hill Tribes were classified to be vulnerable to communist ideology, and the

government therefore had the aim to actively control them (Gillogly, 2008, p. 120). Policies applied over time included, the establishment of schools, training programs and resettlement. This was especially the case as the violent clashes between locals and the military climaxed in the 1970s. The latter one had taken control of the highlands due to the perceived communist threat and war in neighbouring countries (Buergin, 2000, p. 7). There would be a lot more to say about the policies and the way they have been conducted, nevertheless I would like to emphasize at this point, that there was a constant struggle between military and the police forces on the one side and agencies and institutions on the other, which had disadvantageous effects on the population.

The substitution of opium as a source of income was first mentioned in a policy outline in 1963, and was at its high point during the two following decades. The main sources of funding have been the UN and USAID. International donors and the Thai government approached it rather more naively than thought through, with the expectation of “finding the one perfect replacement crop” (Gillogly, 2008, p. 124). Gillogly estimated that at least fifteen replacement crops were tested, with none of them bringing along immediate success to the highlanders situation, much more the new forms of cultivation put them economically at risk and made them dependent on costly and damaging fertilizers (Vaddhanaphuti, 2005, p. 159).

However the policies applied in regard of the Hill Tribe people were not the sole effect on their monetary livelihood. As the Thai government started to claim ownership of the forests they excluded the Hill Tribes from them, and put their historical and cultural way of living at risk. The body in charge of the forests in Thailand is the Royal Forestry Department (RFD), with a history dating back to the 19th century. Despite being a long established institution; active protection of forests only came into place in the post-World War II decades. As the Thai state recognized a massive deterioration of forest areas, due to illegal and legal logging, the public and politics quickly pointed to the Hill Tribe communities and their swidden cultivation. This genuinely matched the negative picture within Thai society of upland minorities, with a general stigmatisation of their culture and way of living (Gillogly, 2008, p. 119; Vaddhanaphuti, 2005, p. 157). As deforestation proceeded the RFD adopted several measures to guarantee its protection. As a result wildlife sanctuaries and national parks have been established over the years, and the population living in and around these forests have been denied rights to settle and make use of the soil they cultivated for generations. A critical piece to the puzzle was the classification of 1A watershed areas during the mid-1980s. These were highly valuable mountain areas in terms of safeguarding the countries water supply (Gillogly, 2008, p. 130). With these policies the government intervened massively into the lives of the Hill Tribe population. Forced resettlement and repression have been the consequences.

The above explained only represents a glimpse of the challenges the Hill Tribe people of Thailand are facing. One other major issue is the question of citizenship and discrimination. Nevertheless, I would say that there is no doubt that the problems Thailand faced in its northern provinces, namely opium, securitising the borders and deforestation have not been solved with an approach of dialogue towards the Hill Tribe population.

4. Theoretical Body: Empowerment & Development Theory

Before it is possible to assess the current approaches, it is important to get a better understanding of the term 'Empowerment' and to classify the development approaches applied up until the early 1990s.

4.1. Empowerment

Searching for a definition of the term empowerment will quickly result in the discovery that it is widely used and without a clear definition. Czuba and Page (1999) recognize that it is used by many without understanding its meaning and that there is no clear definition. Nevertheless, they come to a conclusion which defines empowerment as a "multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives" (Czuba & Page, 1999). Kilby (2006) presents a more complex definition of empowerment, based on "individual" and "collective dimension" of empowerment. He defines it as the ability to "achieve change at a community or collective level as [well as] at a personal level" (Kilby, 2006, p. 15). From his perspective, it "involves expanding a person's capacity for making choices and acting on them" (Kilby, 2006, p. 15).

4.2. The Thai Government Approach & Development Theories

The policies applied by the Thai government in cooperation with international donors following the 2nd World War were far apart from empowering and preparing the Hill Tribe communities for the challenges of the decades ahead. Overall literature tells us, that the interest in the people, their lives and culture was limited and that a real dialogue was never achieved.

The development discourse offers a broad debate; throughout the last two decades scholars put aside the idea of orthodox and mainstream capital development, with the facilitation of economic growth as its central idea. Nevertheless it has been these theories applied throughout the 20th century in the mountains of Thailand. To get a better understanding, the following will illustrate the mainstream theories, namely modernisation, dependency and basic needs approach (Brohman, 1996; Burkey, 1993; Haynes, 2008), describe them briefly and connect them to the policies applied in Thailand, before presenting Burkey's (1993) Human (Personal) Development model.

The idea behind modernisation theory was based on the experiences of the European industrialisation. It incorporates Walt Rostow's five stages model of a society's economic development. The model climaxed in its 3rd stage, the so called 'take-off stage', from there on the development is expected to be self-sustaining, therefore the country has to lay the foundation in the stage before and accumulate capital. This in collaboration with foreign direct investment and international aid was thought to bring the benefits of development to a country. The modernisation theory, based on Rostow's concept, was criticised for not recognising the distinct political, social or economical characteristics of a country.

A simplified version of dependency theory, it is the concept of a world with two nation states. Both dependent on each other, the first as it imports raw materials and resources for its industry. The second as it needs the foreign exchange generated through its exports. The concept of dependency creates manifold links between the different sides, but makes it impossible to move out of a fixed position. As this theory does not contribute to this essay, I will not elaborate on it in more detail.

The basic needs approach, comes closer to the nowadays understanding of development, nevertheless it could be described as the simplified version of it. It is an idea evolved during the 1970s by the ILO (Burkey, 1993, p. 31), and defines two groups of basic needs which should be provided by the state. The first one includes "certain minimum requirements of a family for private consumption" such as food, shelter or clothing. The second group includes services provided by the state, such as drinking water, schooling and health care. It was believed if basic needs are fulfilled; a countries development will start-off.

Reading through the history of development in northern Thailand, it is to recognize that modernisation theory and the basic need approach have been applied in the country and therefore had an effect on the life of the Hill Tribe population. One example is logging, which generated the needed foreign exchange for the Thai government but destroyed the livelihood of the Hill Tribe communities. An example for the basic need approach, are the different services provided through the government, like schools and medical support.

This section only scratches the surface, but it is meant to give a better understanding how development theories were influenced from the outside without having a deep understanding of the local societies and their needs. Burkey (1993, p. 35ff) developed a model based on the Human (Personal) Development, it is the foundation of the two pillars, namely Economic Development and Political Development which finally carry Social Development. In his book Human (Personal) Development is defined as followed: "Human (personal) development is a process by which an individual develops self-respect, and becomes more self-confident, self-reliant, cooperate and tolerant [...] working with other, acquiring new skills and knowledge and active participation in the

economic, social and political development of their community”. Thereby Burkey develops one of the big points of modern development, it starts off with the people and builds upon them. With their help, the society will be capable of taking the next steps, and together communities will develop economically, politically and socially.

5. Development revisited in Thailand

In the case of Thailand we could find several examples of a revisited development approach towards the Hill Tribe minorities. Nevertheless, as no field research has been conducted for this essay, the following could only present the information generally available. Therefore I will present three different projects, Doi Tung Development Project, the Upland Holistic Development Project and Doi Chang. Before doing so, I will present the so-called Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development (SALD) framed by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation (MFLF) a charity associated with the Thai royal family and the founding organisation of Doi Tung Development Project.

5.1. Sustainable Alternative Livelihood Development

The origin of the MFLF dates back to the 1970s (MFLF, 2011). It was then that the belated mother of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, commonly known as Princess Mother, started an initiative to promote and market handicrafts created by Hill Tribe communities. Over the years the project has evolved and became a fully fledged development organisation, with a high degree of organisation and institutional guidelines.

The MFLF describes SALD as a people centric development approach with the aim to provide sustainable and licit livelihoods. The concept is described as being derived from “traditional Alternative Development and crop substitution methods” (MFLF, 2011), with the aim to fight poverty from three angles, namely health, livelihood and education. In this model, health is seen as the first step towards better living conditions. The aspect of livelihood is served through vocational training, thereby the SALD concept emphasises the relation to the local culture and gives the opportunity to “live with nature in a holistic manner” (MFLF, 2011). The aspect of education is not limited to schooling and vocational training only, much more SALD aims to develop local leaders who “are able to continue the process of development on their own” (MFLF, 2011).

It is interesting to compare the list of ‘Best Practices’ to the contrary policies described at the beginning of this essay. It is impossible to describe them all in detail; nevertheless the following should give a short insight:

- People centric; being described as one of the Key Performance Indicators with the aim to serve the interests of grassroots communities.

- Leadership; which aims to bring together the bottom-up and top-down approach and balance the different levels of decision making in favour of the needs of local communities
- Harness local wisdom; practices which build upon the cultural heritage and knowledge
- Ownership; the long-term goal that communities become owners of the developed economic activities
- Adapt, do not copy; the understanding that the SALD principles could be applied generally but “development is adapted to every [...] situation” (MFLF, 2011)

5.2. Doi Tung Development Project

The most prominent project initiated by the MFLF is the Doi Tung Development Project in the Province of Chiang Rai (in the following only referred to as Doi Tung). The project was established in 1987 and covers an area containing 27 villages and a population of round about 10,000 people (Mogg, 2006, p. 9). Up until recently Doi Tung was part of the MFLF. Over the years it developed into an independent brand, which combines business activities on the field of food, horticulture, tourism, and handicrafts with sustainable development.

In reference to the SALD framework the project covers Human Development, Economic Development and Environmental Development (Doi Tung, 2011). The initiative by the Princess Mother was rooted in her longing to see an end to the dependency on opium cultivation. Doi Tung therefore developed a holistic approach, closely related to the SALD framework described above, with emphasis on livelihood and education. Furthermore she personally exaggerated the sustainable character and with it the need to deliver high quality products which could be sold on the market. Economic Development is therefore a core issue of Doi Tung, as “financial stability coupled with social and environmental progress can lead to sustainable development” (Doi Tung, 2011). Doi Tung started off with crop substitution but expanded quickly into several other fields. Nowadays, the villagers are trained on various vocations and it is planned to transfer the ownership of some business units to locals within the next 10 years. Under the roof of Environmental Development all the projects related to reforestation are joined. Thereby Doi Tung not only focused on the protection of the watershed, but also took the needs of local people into account. Whilst replanting space for economic forestry was created and the locals these days are trained and engaged in cultivating the wooded hillsides.

The success of the Doi Tung project is manifold, not only that the forest area has almost doubled (now at ca. 80%) and the per capita income of the population increased from 3,772 baht in 1988 to 30,732 baht in 2003 (Mogg, 2006, p. 10). But also social problems, like migration and prostitution declined, as well as plantation and trade of opium. Furthermore the project attracted international attention and seen as a role model for regions with similar challenges. Most importantly, even

though Doi Tung project has developed into a modern business enterprise, its leaders are still aware of the local people and their needs to prepare them for the challenges ahead (Mogg, 2006, p. 11).

5.3. Upland Holistic Development Project (UHDP)

The approach applied by the UHDP has a holistic perspective and tries to tackle the various fields where the Hill Tribe people are marginalised. This incorporates lack of citizenship, lack of landownership, food dependency, exploitive work environments, and access to basic service like clean water and effective sanitary (UHDP, 2011). The organisation outlines six fields of action on their website, each of them targeting the improvement of the livelihoods of the Hill Tribe communities, within the limited scope given to them. Namely, that is Agroforestry & Sustainable Upland Farming, Backyard Agriculture, Water & Sanitation, Women & Gender Issues, Citizenship & Related Rights, and Microenterprise & Microfinance.

The following will not describe all the tasks in detail, but rather limit it to tasks which focus on income generation and production of food. Reading through the information provided by UHDP the reader understands, that the Hill Tribe groups supported by the organisation, lack the ability to generate an income for a sufficient livelihood by themselves or that they are rather dependent on the outside. As a result an individual is limited in his/her opportunities, to develop his/her life and those who are dependent on them. UHDP therefore developed several strategies to make best use of given conditions, one is to teach and train farmers best practices to cultivate the small hillside landplots, another one, agroforestry, aims to utilize forested areas with a mixed vegetation to grow both agriculture and forest products. For those members of the community who do not have any access to land, UHDP developed strategies for small scale backyard agriculture and livestock production. Along with enhancing the economic activity in the field of agriculture, UHDP actively supports microfinance and microenterprises, to give villages the opportunity to move beyond the level of subsistence farming. Besides the described activities, UHDP also supports the members of the communities they work with to obtain proper registration and other legal documents in relation to citizenship, one of the striking matters for the Hill Tribe communities in Thailand. Furthermore, UHDP actively promotes and develops their model of development steadily, through the Small Farm Resource Centre, an institution which trains and researches in order to develop the livelihood of mountainous farmers.

5.4. Doi Chang Coffee

The history of the Doi Chang community is a good example for the ambiguous effects of the crop substitution policy in the 1980s. With support of the Royal Family and international donors, the Hill Tribe communities in the north of Thailand received the seeds and training to cultivate coffee. The farmers successfully made use of the provided resources and grew coffee beans which then were

sold on the market. Nevertheless the financial situation of the participating families did not improve over the years, which was not satisfactory for the farmers (Doi Chaang, 2011).

Out of their frustration the farmers decided to change the way they have been approaching coffee cultivation, and “established themselves as independent successful coffee producers building their own processing plants, drying facilities and storage warehouses” (Doi Chaang, 2011). A next step in their success story was to join forces with a Canadian coffee company to market and sell their product on the world markets. It is said, that these days 8,000 people live in the Doi Chaang area, with the majority of them earning an income through the Doi Chaang branded coffee.

The success story of Doi Chaang Coffee is not only limited to economic gains, but is also recognizable in three other areas. First of all, the plantation of coffee is beneficial to the areas vegetation, “cultivating the coffee under a canopy of various trees” (Doi Chaang, 2011) does prevent deforestation and keeps the natural ecosystem in balance. This thereby presents a sustainable way of doing agriculture. Furthermore, the financial revenue is used by the villagers to reinvest the money in facilities and services which raise the living standard within the community, namely, running water, electricity, a basic sewage system, a medical clinic and a small school. In addition, higher education becomes available to many of the communities’ young people. Last, but not least, the farmers further develop their knowledge and share it with those around them in the Doi Chaang Coffee Academy.

5.5. Resume

The above presents three distinct stories of development projects in the mountains of northern Thailand. At this point it is to admit that the data available has some weaknesses, nevertheless, all of them have the people and their life circumstance at the centre of their initiatives, and besides it tells us distinctly something about the challenges of the minorities in northern Thailand. E.g. the projects initiated by UHDP describe how to cope best with the limitations the Hill Tribes face in Thailand, and the story of Doi Chaang, reveals how ‘simple’ crop substitution does not bring change to the life of people.

6. Conclusion

This essay gives an insight on the difficult past of Hill Tribe minorities in Thailand, and the policies applied by the government. Especially the period prior to 1990 reveals, that the way development was conducted was not in a dialogue with the local communities.

Therefore a people centric approach seems to be much more suitable to meet the needs of the communities in the mountains of northern Thailand. The case studies above, give an insight on three

projects with aim to have the people and their situation at the heart. Nevertheless it is to ask if those projects contribute to empowerment. Kilby's definition of "expanding a person's capacity for making choices and acting on them" (2006, p. 15) should be at the centre of the evaluation. All three case studies, with their different ways of developing the communities reveal, that the capacity of the people involved expand, schooling, vocational training and a steady income are core issues to all three projects. Furthermore, it is to see that the projects act in favour of the people and actively focus on their needs. However it is to ask, to which extend the circumstances changed to give the people the ability of making choices, or rather involves them in a network of development which guides their and their children's future. Outstanding therefore is to grant the communities ownership to the projects, Doi Chaang is a prime example and also Doi Tung moves towards that direction. Nevertheless UHDP reveals the limitation and constraints minorities in Thailand are still facing (e.g. citizenship). Finally it is to say, modern development projects create the space to empower communities, but in the case of Thailand there is a need from the government to actively extend the legal framework of the citizens who belong to minority groups.

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