



## **NGOs and Natural Resource Management in Mainland Southeast Asia\***

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Since the late-1980s, mainland Southeast Asia has been undergoing increasingly rapid economic change and progress. At the same time, there has been a sharp rise in natural resource degradation. It is now a growing concern among policy-makers, bureaucrats, academics and, not least, lay people. One of the important phenomena underscoring the rising environmental concerns and the changes in the socio-political landscapes of Mainland Southeast Asia is the emergence of locally-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), many of which are increasingly devoted to conservation and natural resource management.

This paper describes the emergence and development of locally-based environmental NGOs in Mainland Southeast Asian Countries (MSEACs). This region is defined here as Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand and Vietnam. The paper also attempts to describe the future of these NGOs and their likely role in the continuing economic transformation and its impact on the physical, social and political environments of these nations.

### **NGOS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA**

While a locally-based NGO movement has existed in Thailand for a considerable time, in other MSEACs it is either non-existent or in its infancy. Under the centrally-planned political-economic structures of the latter countries, the need for participatory-type community development work was generally fulfilled by people's organizations, formed and run under political party leadership. Community development work was also carried out by a number of overseas-based NGOs, welcomed not only as sources of external funding, but also because they agreed to work in consultation with the government and their activities could, therefore, be monitored. Until recently, local NGOs working independently of the government did not exist.

The economic liberalization programs launched by these centrally-planned countries in the late-1980s, however, have brought specific changes conducive to the formation of more independent development-oriented groups. As Sidel (1994) points out in the case of Vietnam, the role of the State in providing social services, and some aspects of control over daily life, has diminished with increasing privatization, thereby providing greater political and economic space to more independent groups.

The role played by various international donor agencies is now quite significant in supporting structural adjustment programs in these countries. Besides providing financial support, these agencies assist the MSEACs in the development of legislative and institutional infrastructure for natural resource management. New laws and institutions have helped reduce ambiguity in the legal and institutional aspects of natural resource management, thereby facilitating the work of NGOs and their precursor groups. Yet the macro-scale resource planning policies generally recommended by these international donor agencies have drawn considerable criticism from the NGO community, academics and environmentalists, as being insensitive to grassroots concerns and local cultures. This, in turn, has brought local development-oriented organizations together on a common platform against the globalization effort they think is implicit in the new resource planning policies and programs.<sup>1</sup>

Today, apart from Thailand, locally-based NGOs engaged in natural resources and environmental management exist in Cambodia and Vietnam. Though non-existent in Lao at the moment, their emergence

in the not-so-distant future cannot be discounted.<sup>2</sup>

The development of NGOs in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam have followed different strands, however, depending on the socio-political situation in these countries. In all the three countries NGOs have emerged when the political environment has been relatively open—free from rigid State control. Indeed the degree of political freedom reflects the number and diversity of NGOs and their relationship with the government.

In Thailand, which has enjoyed longer periods of political stability and political freedom, local NGOs are the most diversified in Mainland Southeast Asia and are now a strong force that has often stalled government or private-sector attempts to launch large projects with doubtful environmental impact. In Vietnam, on the other hand, under relatively rigid State control, the few NGOs that exist are little more than training and advisory groups focusing on environmental impact assessment (EIA). It is difficult to draw the line between those not linked to the government and those that are. NGOs in Cambodia, on the contrary, are independent of the government, partly because most were formed during the period (1991-1993) when the national administration was in the hands of the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), and after Cambodia's return to democracy following the May 1993 general elections. Also, the other aid agencies working in the country provide the necessary support for local Cambodian NGOs.

### **NGOS IN CAMBODIA<sup>3</sup>**

The formation of local NGOs in Cambodia was largely inspired by the presence of a large number of overseas NGOs during the early 1990s, when the political climate began to normalize during the UNTAC presence (1991-1993). Virtually all of the 35 active groups, including NGOs and associations, that exist today were formed during the above period. Many more groups exist on an informal basis. Some of them are seeking government permission to establish formally.

The work of most Cambodian NGOs is cross-sectoral in nature, though there are at least five working in environmental fields. The major activities of these environmental NGOs include education and training, resource conservation and tree planting. As many of these projects directly serve the needs of local communities, public participation in the projects is high.

Cambodian NGOs receive support from international NGOs, donor agencies, including various United Nations bodies, and governments of other countries. The Cambodian government itself provides little, if indeed any, support. According to some NGO workers, the government's attitude toward local NGOs is more of suspicion than cooperation. The Cambodian situation today is thus similar to Thailand's in the 1970s and early 1980s when emerging grassroot-level NGOs were under government suspicion as political agencies in disguise.

The Cambodian NGOs have formed an informal alliance for cooperation which meets once every month. Through this alliance, the Cambodian NGOs cooperate with other international NGOs, and also try to link up with NGOs outside Cambodia. These include TERRA (Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliances) and TDRI in Thailand.

While most Cambodian NGOs are at the grassroots-level, a few are active in training and policy research. One of these, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), was established to enhance human resource development and to conduct research and analysis to contribute to sustainable development policies and strategies. Many CDRI programs aim to offer Cambodians information and skills to empower them to participate more fully in the reconstruction of their country. Though a locally-based NGO, CDRI was established and is run by expatriates.

Another high profile NGO is the Ramsey Sophanna Foundation, established recently by H.R.H. Princess Christine Alfsen Norodom Serivuth, who views training in integrated resource management as the top priority for regional cooperation. She also favors strengthening policy-making and planning.

### **NGOS IN THAILAND**

Thailand's rapid economic growth during the past decade has had at least two negative consequences. First, despite a remarkable rise in national income, development policies have failed to improve its distribution. Income disparities between the urban rich and the rural poor have, in fact, widened (TDRI, 1993). Second, the growth, first based on agricultural expansion and later on industrialization, has been accompanied by a number of environmental problems that affect society at large, particularly the less privileged rural areas. These have less bargaining power and fewer resources to mitigate their problems.

The development of Thai NGOs has run parallel with these socio-economic changes. The initial wave of Thai NGOs concentrated on health, literacy and economic activities as a means of promoting overall human development. Their activities targeted mainly rural areas, although some became active in urban slums.

Rural community development still remains the core of most NGO activities in Thailand. Since the late 1980s, however, many NGOs have launched an "environmental approach," as a response to increasing environmental degradation (Pfirrmann and Kron, 1992, p. I/70).

Popular environmental awareness in Thailand gained momentum in the late 1980s when a number of environmental problems became obvious—the flash floods in 1988, blamed on deforestation, and the sporadic cases of illness and deaths, allegedly due to industrial pollution, for example. A number of advocacy groups acted as catalysts in raising mass consciousness through awareness campaigns and protests against projects and policies viewed as environmentally-damaging. Notable among these were the protests against the government plan to use Khao Yai National Park for conventional tourism, against the construction of the Nam Choen dam, to pressure the government to revoke commercial logging concessions, and the famous privately-initiated "Magic Eye" anti-pollution awareness campaign in Bangkok to save the polluted Chao Phraya river and to fight littering in the city.

While the success of these protests and campaigns in achieving their objectives has been mixed, they succeeded in producing some beneficial results:

- they succeeded in drawing the attention of the public, press, politicians and academia towards environmental issues
- the success of the protests boosted the NGOs' confidence in their own ability to influence government decisions that ran counter to public opinion
- they helped bring different NGOs together to work on a common platform (these informal groups were progenitors of a number of new environmental NGOs, such as the Project for Ecological Recovery, and networking organizations)
- their success inspired other development NGOs to turn to environmental issues and to adopt an "environmental approach" in their work

The close association of livelihood issues with environmental degradation was a key factor in drawing community development NGOs into the environmental arena (Hirsch, 1994, p. 10). The dividing line between these "purely environmental" NGOs and those whose environmental approach is only secondary is thin. The category an organization belongs to depends mainly on how the organization views itself.

Identifying the exact number of Thai environmental NGOs has become a difficult task, further compounded by Thai NGOs existing in a variety of forms: associations, foundations, research institutes, forums, groups, projects and committees. They vary in the geographical focus of their work (local/regional/national and rural/urban), issues covered (water resources, rural ecology, forests, coastal resources, air pollution, littering and so on), and the specifics of their activities (research organization, advocacy group, campaign organization, and so on).

Both the government and NGOs and academics have attempted to estimate the number of environment-development NGOs. Their estimates vary. The Directory of Environmental NGOs (DEQP, 1994), compiled by the Environmental Promotion Division of the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion (under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment), lists 132 organizations under five major groups, including 44 registered under the DEQP, in accordance with the environmental law<sup>4</sup> passed in 1992. A

more recent preliminary estimate by the Thailand Environment Institute (TEI) puts the number of local and foreign-based environmental NGOs at over 200 (TEI, 1994). Of these, 46 are registered with the DEQP, 16 are overseas agencies of which five are registered with the DEQP, three are foreign volunteer assistance services, and three are non-governmental funding agencies.

The majority of environmental NGOs in Thailand are small organizations, scattered throughout the country. About 60 are based in Bangkok and represent a wide variety, ranging from advocacy groups such as the Project for Ecological Recovery (PER), which focuses on such issues as water and energy (well-known for its anti-dam protests), and non-advocacy groups like the World Environment Center Foundation (WECF) which focuses mainly on urban, industrial and health issues and works closely with business groups and transnational corporations, to conservationist groups such as the Wildlife Fund, Thailand (WFT) and those specializing in environmental education, for example, the Green World Foundation (*Mulnithi Lok Sii Khiew*).

### **Government-NGO Relationship**

Since the atmosphere of suspicion in the 1970s when, during the height of the Communist Party of Thailand's insurgent activities, grassroots-level NGOs were accused of being communist front organizations, the NGO-government relationship has come a long way to at least the beginnings of sustained cooperation. Since the 1980s, despite the disagreements over environmentally-sensitive projects, there have been encouraging developments towards NGO-government cooperation (Suwana-adth, 1991, *ibid.*, p. 43). Notable among these are:

- The National Economic and Social Development Board's (NESDB) invitation to Thai NGOs to participate in an Asian Development Bank-supported pilot project to train village volunteers in promoting environmental conservation.
- Inclusion of NGOs in the preparatory process for the 1992 UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro.
- NGO's participation in developing the National Forestry Sector Master Plan.
- Establishment within the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives of an NGO Liaison Office for agriculture and environment.
- Participation of NGOs in drawing up the country's Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan.

These interactions have been sporadic, however, and their success mixed. Yet, they reflect a mutual need to collaborate. What really draws the two together is the ongoing environmental degradation that has accompanied Thailand's rapid industrialization. The government has begun to accept that NGOs do not work against the system and that they are often effective in overseeing some projects at grassroots levels. Government agencies, such as the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Department of Technical Cooperation, have themselves set up NGOs. Others, such as the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), now support NGOs to improve their own image. NGOs too are beginning to accept that they alone provide no alternative to development. They now understand that their job is to complement the work of government and official donor organizations (Rüland and Ladavalaya, 1991, p. 58). It is in the interests of the NGOs' broader goals to work with the government.

This new understanding explains why, for the first time, in the Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996), the government made provision for NGO involvement in the planning process. The Enhancement and Conservation of National Environmental Quality Act, B.E. 2535 (ECNEQA-1992)—the framework law on the environment—was another step in government-NGO-people cooperation in environmental management as it provides a legal basis for this tripartite interaction. Although still imperfect, the new law encourages cooperation among NGOs, bureaucrats, technocrats, academia and the general public, on environment-related issues. It recognizes the role of NGOs in the conservation of the environment, and spells out their rights and duties in the enhancement of national environmental quality (Sections 6 and 7 of the ECNEQA-1992).

Despite these encouraging initiatives, much remains to be done. First, government policies remain opaque and access to information on projects and policies is difficult. This, of course, rekindles NGOs' suspicion of

the government's commitment. Sometimes, though not always, this lack of transparency stems from traditional Thai bureaucratic attitudes of secrecy and jealousy in sharing information. Second, most grassroots-level NGOs remain only at the periphery, often outside the slowly evolving NGO-government relationship. They distance themselves not only from the government but also from larger NGOs.

Third, while the government needs to become more open, NGOs must learn how to participate in national development. NGOs lack organizational sophistication in defining their positions or in countering those of the government. They often criticize government policies without proposing viable alternatives, or substantiating, with evidence and scientific research, their own positions on controversial issues.

### **Problems and Probable Future of Thai Environmental NGOs**

Environmental processes are complex. Designing environmentally-sound policies requires constant, and often costly, research and information efforts. The limited financial and human resources available to NGOs make them vulnerable to these blindspots. Fortunately, many academics are willing to provide research to NGOs. Some NGOs, such as the Sueb Nakasathien Foundation—founded by well-known academics—have become a strong voice for the environment. Only a small number of small- and medium-scale NGOs, however, are able to share the services of academics and scholars conducting research. Having in-house research facilities would indeed enhance the credibility of NGOs and ultimately give their alternative positions more weight.

Conducting training and research activities, of course, needs not only human resources, but also financial ones. Securing these is going to become a more and more challenging task for Thai NGOs, as external funding which, according to one estimate accounts for 70-90 percent of the budget of most NGOs,<sup>5</sup> is declining. With its rising economic prosperity, Thailand is receiving significantly lower priorities from external funding agencies. Due to recession in their own countries, they now increasingly focus on neighboring countries with more urgent financial needs. At the same time, Thai NGOs made no serious efforts to garner recognition, let alone support, from local funding sources as long as foreign funding was easily available. Only now, coordinating NGOs, such as the NGO-CORD, are planning to set up a trust fund to finance small projects and provide working capital. They are also trying to channel the bilateral or multilateral external assistance to make it more equitably distributed.<sup>6</sup> Individually, some NGOs are trying to shed their traditionally publicity-shy image by directly informing the public of their activities. Thus they seek financial support, while tightening their own budgets. Other NGOs with expertise in certain fields are marketing this training to others to generate income.

To overcome the twin obstacles of funding and a paucity of human resources, Thai environmental NGOs must now work even harder to develop common work strategies. There is also an urgent need to bridge the communications gap between small NGOs usually concerned with livelihood issues, and larger environmental NGOs which focus on conservation. Environmental degradation has reached such critical levels that a conflict of interests among community development groups and conservationists is imminent—unless a common, sustainable development approach is soon adopted.

### **NGOS IN VIETNAM**

Already burdened with soaring population pressure, and severe damage through the decades-long war, Vietnam's natural resource base and environment must now accommodate the economic development process. The government alone is unlikely to be able to address all environmental problems. Fortunately, Vietnam's academic institutions have relatively well-developed research facilities for addressing environmental issues. They are now assuming a leading role in addressing environmental issues.

It is these institutions—universities and research institutes—that have become the breeding grounds for NGOs in environmental conservation and management. Nearly all have been established by individuals who work closely with the government on policy and technical matters. It remains unclear as to which of these NGOs work independently of the government and which do not. Most Vietnamese NGOs have focused on policy research and training.

## **Environmental NGOs and Associations**

Until recently, most organizations concerned with environmental issues were government agencies, such as the Institute for Development Strategies (IDS)—a think tank and research arm of the State Planning Committee (SPC)—or semi-affiliated institutes, such as the Artemia Shrimp Research and Development Center and the Training and Research Center for Water Supply and Environmental Technology (CEFINEA).

Among the few NGOs established in the past few years are the Center for Natural Resources Management and Environment Studies (CRES); the Center for Environment Research, Education and Development (CERED); the Environment and Sustainable Development Center (ESDC); and the Institute of Ecological Economics (IEE).

CRES, established in 1985, is probably more independent in its activities and considers itself as the first NGO active in environmental research and policy analysis. CRES appears to play a strong role in environmental policy. It enjoys good relations with Vietnam's Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, the Prime Minister's Office, and with key advisors to government agencies. Its director was the key actor in drafting the 1991 environmental legislation. He is currently working with others on drafting laws and regulations that will put the legislation into practice. CRES's current activities include land management research and projects, training environmental experts, environmental legislation and policy, environmental conservation projects, and improving the quality of Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment's (MOSTE) environmental impact assessment as it applies to issues of natural resource conservation and protected areas. It also participates in international research networks.

CERED, founded in 1991 by ex-CRES people, is concerned with the policy side of balancing economic growth with environmental quality. The center has good relations with key international donors, especially the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Japan Wildlife Research Center, and the Nagao Environment Foundation. CERED's research focuses on global climate change and domestic environmental policy issues. It is, however, a rather small organization in terms of staff and often subcontracts research work, so much so that some workers do not consider it a research institute in its own right.

In addition to its NGOs, Vietnam has some 15 to 20 professional associations covering various areas of science and technology. In 1986, these associations came together to form the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA). Both IEE and ESDC are members of VUSTA. IEE was created in 1988 by a retired university professor. It was Vietnam's first environmental institute.

Among those mentioned, ESDC is the newest. It was established on June 5, 1994 (Environment Day) as a research, training and education institute. Its policy research focuses on sustainable development at the grassroots level. It is also a non-profit consultancy for provincial and rural organizations. In future it plans to focus on two related problems: urbanization and migration.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from local NGOs, Vietnam has semi-affiliated government organizations, considered part of the universities. The Artemia Shrimp Research and Development Center at Can Tho University is one example. It receives supports from the European Community and a Dutch NGO. The center specializes in research and development on fresh and brackish-water prawn aquaculture.

The Training and Research Center for Water Supply and Environmental Technology (CEFINEA) is another example of a semi-affiliated organization. Founded in 1990 by the Ministry of Education and Training, this institute was given the task of training, carrying out scientific research and applying advanced technology to water supply for urban and rural areas, waste and waste-water treatment, and environmental management.

## **Government-NGO Relationship**

In Vietnam, NGOs and the government appear to be inter-dependent. Most NGOs are concerned with

policy research and analysis. In these areas, their inter-dependence with the government is probably justified. The funding sources for these agencies are such international agencies as UNDP, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), OECD, International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Government of Vietnam itself. They are thus well-placed and, despite their small workforces, do not undergo the hardships small NGOs in developing countries generally do. It is, however, hard to find action-oriented NGOs in Vietnam.

### **NGOs and Environmental Issues**

Most NGOs see deforestation and coastal resources management as issues calling for priority attention. Although deforestation is a national priority problem, it is particularly serious in the North. In the South, mangrove destruction through shrimp farming is an even more urgent problem.

At present, environmental impact assessment (EIA) appears to be the main environmental focus of agencies in Vietnam. As the amount and scale of public projects expand, the demand for EIA provides extra-budgetary resources for local research organizations to act as consultants. The emphasis on EIA without due recognition of cost-benefit analysis, however, may lead to over-extraction of natural resources. The benefits derived from EIA also depend on the monitoring and enforcement capacities of regulatory agencies. It is also clear that environmental considerations have not become an integral part of economic decision-making. The National Environmental Protection Research Program is one agency that focuses on EIA. The Program was created by MOSTE in 1991 to assist the Ministry in environmental policy planning, EIA, and legal reforms. The Program, with support from UNEP, has carried out two EIA case studies in Vietnam.

### **Institutional Capacities**

Most agencies, except those affiliated with the State Planning Committee (SPC), lack economic expertise. SPC economic planners usually come from engineering, mathematics and operational research backgrounds. There are, however, numerous professional associations. The role and potential of these associations in public policy-making are not immediately evident, but this issue is worth exploring in further detail.

Among these agencies, networks of researchers and educators are quite strong. Their research skills and knowledge of environmental and natural resources issues are relatively well advanced in comparison to the capacities of government agencies. Still, though Vietnam benefits from highly-educated experts, particularly in universities and quasi-government research institutes, there is a severe deficiency in information capacities.

### **The Probable Future of Vietnamese NGOs**

Vietnamese NGOs are more directly communicative with their government than are their Thai counterparts. This is partly due to the absence of a tradition of independent private organizations. Another contributing factor is that most locally-based NGOs are founded by university professors, who are themselves government employees and also sit on various government panels and committees as experts. With Vietnam's on-going liberalization program, these NGOs are becoming more and more independent, particularly in securing external funding. Although NGOs and the government seem to enjoy a healthy relationship as both are equally concerned with solving the environmental issues at hand, one would welcome the emergence of completely independent research institutions holding independent views, critical if necessary, on environment-related policies and programs. Given the current development of Vietnamese NGOs and the openness of the government to NGO views, it may not be long before such institutions indeed appear.

### **CONCLUSION**

Growing environmental awareness and ongoing economic liberalization in Mainland Southeast Asia are

likely to encourage more public participation in resource management activities and to strengthen the region's emerging environmental NGO movement. In Thailand, where the movement is the most developed, environmental NGOs have become a strong voice that the government can no longer ignore. Following many fierce confrontations with the government, for the NGOs this represents a hard won victory.

In the remaining three countries, however, such confrontations with the government are presently neither possible, nor advisable. As public-private sector cooperation is new to both the governments and the newly-founded NGOs in these countries, and as the restructuring of the economy is just beginning, cooperation appears the wiser strategy.

As a number of environmental concerns are common to all Mainland Southeast Asia, it would be beneficial for the NGOs to develop links with each other for sharing information and expertise. Already, NGOs such as TERRA and TDRI have forged linkages with their counterparts and government agencies in the other MSEACs.

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