Constructing Political Process and Reform for Decentralization in Thailand: Three Case Studies in Decentralized Natural Resource Management

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I. Political Dynamics and Decentralization in Thailand

Politics, policy, and decentralization are all dynamics, and changing as parallel processes during the recent two decades. Decentralization is dynamic—a continued interacting process of state and local community relationships occurring within changing political contexts of political reform steps toward democracy. In Thailand, three case studies of decentralization, or of implementation of decentralized decision making in natural resource management are discussed and analyzed as a politics-led process. This has been demonstrated by three different arrangements of accountability and actors within a co-management practice of three watersheds in Chiang Mai province.

Thailand has engaged political reform and decentralization for almost two decades starting from the early steps of public debate and initiative in peoples’ participation implemented in several pilot schemes, and guided by the framework of the Seventh National Plan since 1985.

In 1997, the enactment of the “New Constitution” has marked a radical change in political reform followed by the general election of Congress and Senate members, local government members at sub-district and provincial levels. Few cases of successful participatory natural resource management have been reported in all regions including Northern, Southern, and Northeastern Region, etc.. In parallel, public demonstrations, claims, and protests receive more attention from several groups beyond NGOs and grass-root organizations.

“Decentralization” and “Participation” have been integrated in practice into Thailand policy and plan since 1990. However, the implementation includes several continued phases and steps. A public forum and movement on Community Forest Law Draft has been a major political negotiation process at national and local levels. These include several sets of actors and alliance on different issues and at different space.

Competing views are openly addressed in public meetings, forums, and media. Though, political negotiations and resolutions are researched and reported, the public only
understands series of events or a small part of the decentralization and process of few key actors. Most studies might create misleading conclusions. In Thailand, roles of the middle-level leaders of agencies are active and critical, especially, in community forestry, watershed management, land use, and irrigation. These have been under-represented in all actor analyses. Media is also more concerned with the conflict events and NGOs.

In addition, the explanation of local and national accountability practices and variation might be insufficient when the case studies under common changing political contexts is not well analyzed and compared. It is certainly critical to observe what is happening in three cases of different power relationship conditions in local communities as the results of decentralization. Three sets of negotiating power and relations in natural resource management include: 1) the upstream-downstream communities / upland ethnic and lowland farmers (Chomthong Case); 2) Hmong and Karen (Mae Tho—Omlong Case); 3) Local communities and agencies (Sam Muen Case). These power relations include several different sets of actors and accountability arrangements. Looking at the early impacts of decentralization, three cases are observed to lead to a more administrative and political decentralization at local levels.

Therefore, this paper discusses and answers three questions: 1) How the recent political process is re-constructed by multiple actor groups and alliances to create conditions for decentralization? 2) How decentralization is practiced and constrained at local levels in three different cases? 3) What are the preliminary impacts of decentralization in local communities/ and at the local level?

II. Learning Communities and Civic Groups for Campaigning of “Participation”

Thai intellectuals, scholars, progressive agencies’ leaders, and NGOs have been working to spread ideas on “participation,” and engaged themselves actively in several research and development projects since 1980. There are four major groups: 1) social and political critiques and columnists; 2) government and agencies, and NGOs’ advisors or
leaders; 3) Colleagues/partners in action researchers and development programs and projects; and 4) political philosophers or activists.

In mid 1980, the early irrigation development project called “People Irrigation Project” (PIP) launched in four small watersheds under a multi-agency cooperation with local water user groups and three provincial governments (Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Phrae). There were some efforts to integrate local water users into problem identification, planning, and canal management. Institutional complexities and bureaucratic regulations have been observed and discouraged many project staffs and researchers. However, new idea is continued among mid-level leaders of agencies.

During 1985-1990, several small NGOs worked on community development and education. Northern Thailand was observed to have increasing problems of resource management, continuing poverty, shifting cultivation, and deforestation. Few NGO groups were working to expand their activities into natural resource management, upland ethnic village culture, and further to organize a series of protest. One event well known as the “Ban Huey Kaew Protest” confronted opposing views of agency and local communities on conservation, protection, and development. NGOs were very successful in bringing up issues of public concern, and reached out to get media as their allies.

Local organizations of farmers and natural resource managers generally show growing in their interest and involvement in social, economic, and political activities. A few of them have become sophisticated, and make their choices to address specific agendas at the national level. Some of them work with all members’ cooperation, without external support. However, a few cases of conspiracy concerning financial support were observed by the other civic groups as more public information is becoming available for public access. A series of protests and public meetings take their agendas directly to high level government members.

For more than ten years, a strong research and development project support by the Ford Foundation led to a new work partnership and alliance between university research groups and forestry, irrigation, and land-management agencies and NGOs in Northern
Thailand. The projects initiated pilot actions in community forestry and participatory irrigation management.

UNDCP supported development in highland villages have become more concerned on an urgent need to integrate natural resource management and environment into community development and crop replacement program to reduce poverty and deforestation pressure in areas of drug production and trade. Expanding concerns about implementation of “participation processes” have been observed in many rural development and natural resource projects.

Twenty years of efforts to encourage an empowerment of poor farmers and local communities through education, participatory learning and planning processes are evident, and successful in Northern and Northeastern Thailand. Community Forest has become common approach to both agencies and NGOs. Public forum were organized among different concerned groups who together work and select their allies to stimulate a process of community forestry law draft and negotiation with political parties and government. Community Forestry Law is subject to Cabinet Review and approval of the Congress and the Senate in February 2002.

At the national level, besides implementing local government election and administrative decentralization of Tambon Administration Organization (TAO), the government has appointed two committees called Committee of Decentralization and the Committee for Bureaucratic Reform. These mechanisms are expected to explore, recommend a new national and local decentralized structure and service-oriented, trained agencies to work in partnership with future local government, private groups and individuals to provide public services. It is aimed to create downward accountability to provide demanded services with acceptable services and appropriate regulations and monitoring.

TAOs of elected members have been operating in more than 10,000 sub-districts with incremental financial responsibilities. At this stage, a small proportion of TAOs is reported to have high capacity for taking responsibilities to be more independent in local administration and financing. Five CEO governors are assigned with local government functions and
decentralized decision-making in five selected provinces in all regions. Though CEO model is experimental, it has stimulated a national agenda, and expanded public debate on local government and decentralization.

Relating to water resource management, the Prime Minister’s Office, through the Office of National Water Resource Committee, is implementing decentralized management at river-basin level. There are currently more than ten river basin committees (RBC) which are composed of representation of all stakeholders/water managers and users. The structure is undergoing review and readjustment with some primary functions in integrated water resource planning and monitoring.

What size, what representation and how accountability, and rules should be made and implemented are issues open for further steps to be guided by legal and organization reform of water and natural resource management. The government advising committee for bureaucratic reform has recently announced new ways of organizing ministries and bureaus. Moreover, there is some encouragement for all ministries to reduce their human resource and form public private companies to deal with the contracted public services. Privatization is encouraged at the national level and private sector is encouraged to be partners with agencies and local government. NGOs are welcome to compete for all service provision contracts.
III. Progressive Midlde-Level Leaders of Agencies, NGOs, and Media

Several research and reports over-emphasize the roles of NGOs and media with insufficient information and understanding on the actual roles of progressive leaders working from inside government organizations toward increased participation and decentralization. University researchers have been working to encourage partnership and alliance between NGOs with local communities and agencies. Middle-level leaders (MLL) within agencies have made their efforts to link to individual members and groups in NGOs and media to enable new initiatives and decentralized development activities.

In Thailand, like several Asian countries, some new educated progressive thinking people have joined government agencies, especially the mid-level leadership structure. These persons have been an internal driving force to change ideas and procedures in routine and development practice, such as, in community forestry, watershed management, irrigation management, land development.

Middle-level leaders (MLL) have been taking double roles as officials and sometimes as activists. They are active in the reform processes of forest and irrigation management, rural health care and rural doctor networks, etc. Information sharing and participation of these leaders as partners to researchers and NGOs brought some inside understanding on agencies’ administration, culture, and behavior to deal with natural resource management. Without internal allies within agencies, university professors and NGOs are mostly working their strategies with their weak articulation and leading theoretical concepts. Many of MLLs held doctoral and masters degrees. Some of them demonstrate innovative ideas and projects.

There are several types of participation activities initiated and practiced in community-based natural resource management. The activities include: 1) development of pilot projects emphasizing “participation”; 2) operating projects with training on participatory methods; 3) establishing local mechanism and local community networks for decision making and management; 4) sharing information with NGOs, local communities, media and private
companies; 5) encouraging partnerships and fora with NGO; and 6) negotiating for relaxing constraining rules and with administration, etc.

Thai media have made progressive changes to report ideas and events which stimulate participation and political decentralization. The media have clearly increased their reporting and features on problems in natural resource management and environment. Moreover, few powerful media include some contributions of researchers, university scholars, and NGOs in social and political critiques and analysis features. Evidently, a television news coverage and documentary program became popular, especially, among urban audiences.

IV. Three Case Studies in Natural Resource Management

“Participation” and “decentralization are major ideas in community-based NRM and environmental management in Thailand. Many of the pilot projects were designed to establish partnership of agencies, universities, NGOs, and grassroot/local organizations. With experiences in new concepts and approaches, many long-term projects working with local organizations and villagers to test and disseminate their successful lessons to other districts, provinces, and watersheds.

Combining conservation and development approaches receive continued participation of local communities which later mostly turned into networks of conservation and conflict management in local areas. Political process clearly bring into local groups better understanding of resource rights and co-management of multi users and managers. Moreover, some strong evidence demonstrates that “participation” has an expanding impacts on political decentralization. Many local leaders are currently engaged in political elections and panels. More ethnic leaders have found their political roles at provincial levels. Almost ten key Karen and Hmong Leaders become known to the media and the public. Almost twenty professors and NGOs leaders are currently in the Senate to work at national politics after the last election in Year 2000. The participation process is more evident in village and public meetings on local issues and the impacts of national issues and policies. Anti-globalization and multi-national organizations and financial institutions received attention from the wider
community with diverse opinions during ADB Meeting in Chiang mai, Year 2000. Community Forest Law and Water Law Drafts are currently the center of public debate in parallel to bureaucratic reform.

Three case studies demonstrate how the participation process continues adjusting and creating impacts on political decentralization in local areas.

4.1 Chomthong Case: Competing NRM Agenda and Powerful External Allies

Chomthong is a southern district where Inthanon National Park and critical watershed located in Chiang Mai Province. A topography of high mountain and narrow valley form a small lowland market town and irrigated agriculture linking to more than 30 scattered villages in upland and highland areas. Increasing population and expanding intensive agriculture raise concerns on NRM and competing uses of water and on deforestation in the watersheds of Mae Klang and major tributaries.

Political process and allies demonstrate a strong linkage with a complex and diverse external actors who have competing views and agenda. Karen ethnic villages of wet rice farmers have been living in and members of local institutions and culture for more than 100 years. Local major groups of actors tend to form an alliance to protest new ethnic migrants, especially Hmong shifting cultivators and cabbage growers.

Mae Klang Watershed, as a major water source to more than 10,000 hectares of year-round intensive cultivation of rice, garlic, onions, soybeans, and vegetables for the city markets in Northern Thailand and Bangkok. Upland Karen rice farmers are well accepted by lowland farmers who generally maintain friendships with the upland villages.

During 1960 onward, Hmong settlements were established and expanding in the upstream areas. Thai government’s policy on drug control/suppression developed agricultural centers and organized the resettlements of the former opium growers, Hmong. They are voluntarily converted to grow cash crops and vegetables. From 1987, lowland farmers began to address their concerns on forest destruction, water shortage and toxic substances. Insufficient information on development was quite evident. Few local leaders expressed their
views on the development benefits which are unevenly distributed. The first protest brought the Director General of the Royal Forest Department (RFD) to Chomthong in 1987. The District Office approved the joint effort of several local groups in a survey of watershed forests. The groups were mostly the leaders of community-managed irrigation and village leaders from lowland areas.

From 1985, Royal Irrigation Department (RID) has worked closely with local water user groups of community-managed irrigation to encourage an inter-system management of 15 irrigation systems along Mae Klang. The project introduced “participatory irrigation management, in which all water users elect their leaders to represent them in water management decisions for all construction, improvement, water allocation, distribution, and maintenance. RID provided technical support, joint investment on construction, and training for O&M.

Many local leaders improved their local political networks, and extended their links to many university and NGO supporters to promote their watershed forest agenda against the highlander who are evidently living and cultivating in the National Park. Few external allies were campaigning for negotiations to make an agreement on land-use mapping and monitoring in the upstream/protected areas. A Buddhist conservation NGO worked to propose the resettlement of Hmong to lowland areas. Other influential NGO led by a university professor challenged on the issues of local knowledge, ethnic community rights, and sustainable forest management. Conflict has deepened, and expanded to involve many development activists who brought the Chomthong case to the national agenda on forestland conflict and watershed management.

During 1987 to 1990, new participatory watershed management and community forestry carried out by partnership of local communities, RFD, and university researchers has been documented as a successful method and learning tool for working with the network of multi-ethnic communities in the upstream and downstream areas in Sam Muen. The sites became known to be examples for involving many different ethnic leaders into participatory land-use planning, agreement on land-use and forest protection, and resolving conflict. NGOs
and Karen leaders in Chomthong and other southern districts learned and applied co-
management governance and established watershed network.

Before 1997, political process and participation has been focused on NRM and
environment. There was no formal political decentralization until the election of local
government or TAO. One elected body represents both the upland and lowland villages. A
series of public debates and tripartite meetings organized by agencies and NGOs increase
experience and capacity of local leaders to new roles in decentralized decisions for local
development and NRM.

4.2 Sam Muen Case: Local Watershed Network of Multi-Ethnic Communities and Co-
Management in Community Forestry

From 1986 to 89, and 90-93, phases of the watershed and highland development project
were implemented with a new participatory approach. The planning and implementation
involved representative leaders of all ethnic communities along five tributary watersheds in
classification, designation, and uses of forests and management responsibilities in protection,
forest-fire control, resource use and sharing, land-use planning and monitoring, rules and
enforcement. There have been joint efforts of RFD, university and local village leaders to
involve villagers in participatory planning.

RFD was taking roles to provide technical support and policy and scientific information
to local villages and leaders. Local villagers come to the planning meetings and discuss
problems, rules, criminal activities, agreements on new arrangement of resource uses and
regulations. There were also challenges to the management network/committee who later
found solutions with the support of the villagers to charge high fine rates on delinquent
behavior. Community forest and watershed protected areas were mapped and monitored.
Evidently, there has been a rapid increase of dense regenerated forests, especially on the
mountain peaks and steep sloped land. Local land use was monitored, and the rules have
been enforced by the network of leaders and villagers.
District Offices participated with the village leaders and TAOs to spread the approaches and results, and encouraged the expansion of project operation to many neighboring watersheds and districts. Mapping and land-use information and monitoring could bring for negotiation with RFD all villages who frequently allow the land use expansion in the deteriorated areas when poor families require more cultivated land for their subsistence crops or the collection of non-timber forest products.

RFD also provided technical training, cross visits to learn from other successful project sites. The watershed network/committee is composed of the elected leaders of all villages. The network panel has become a forum for information sharing, negotiation, and getting agreements, and rule enforcement. This is observed to expand participation management and conservation practice, which indicates an emerging political decentralization at local areas in Sam Muen.

One sub-district government of TAO learned and established the participatory forest management. This a merging of forest management into local political institution to encourage villagers to share decisions and information. RFD and TAOs worked together to carry out re-allocation of forest land for agriculture. One case of co-management to initiate voluntary resettlement of more than ten households from the sensitive watershed forest to new designated areas. The other effort is to map village and agricultural areas for negotiating with the RFD officials on a demarcation of new national park.

The watershed network/committee also report to RFD when more than 20 families of the upland villages moved their house to clear new forest for their resettlements. The monitoring and reporting have been used, and the decisions were shared among all parties. However, the process to deal with the case was quite an effort to enforce the established rules and welcome those families to solve their problems with the groups. In recent years, TAOs are taking key roles to sustain cooperation and participation in NRM and community forestry in Sam Muen.
4.3 Mae Tho-Omlong Case: Local Effort for Establishing Allies and Participation of Karen and Hmong for Watershed management

Omlong and more than twenty villages, located on the western range of the Thai-Burma border to the south of Chiang Mai City, are the core cultural region of Karen ethnic group. Karen are well known as long term migrants from Burma. Many researchers have documented Karen forest conservation practices and their sustainable agriculture systems as successful models for development and NRM. Especially, NGOs scholars and media continue to have strong interest in the Karen campaign on conservation and local knowledge.

Before the Hmong moved into this area, Mae Tho was a dense green forest. It was the fallow forest of Karen’s shifting cultivation fields. Growing markets for cabbage have stimulated rapid expansion of production and land use in Mae Tho. Karen and Hmong have entered into a series of conflicts over forest land use and over lapping rights on fallow forest. Moreover, Karen’s concerns about water for their irrigated rice fields led to a wide discussion on deforestation and environment.

A few local leaders have sought external alliances with universities and NGOs. The Ford Foundation and Thai-German Foundation provided support on action research, cattle land management, and conservation and community forest management network. Karen leaders worked to initiate forest management and conservation activities to involve Mae Tho, the Hmong villages.

Efforts to establish alliances for conservation and land-use monitoring had many difficulties concerning forest demarcation and land use monitoring. Some misunderstandings among local leaders have stimulated inter-group conflict. There was active participation of TAOs, District Offices, researchers, and foresters.

A series of participatory planning and reforestation activities of Karen and Hmong has increased cooperation and trust between two ethnic communities. They became more involved in forest demarcation and reached an agreement to protect watershed forests. However, rule enforcement was the most crucial responsibilities of Karen leaders who reported many acts of forest clearing by Hmong cabbage growers in newly opened forests.
Some poor Karen sold their fallow forests fields to Hmong. They are known to have good market linkages and a good cash economy. Only a small number of Karen have adjusted themselves to commercial production of cabbages and tomatoes.

Karen leaders have moved into local government positions after the last election at provincial and sub-district levels. TAOs are currently dominated by Karen. However, local participation in sustainable management became more complex when one key Karen leader was shot. The alliance is weakening after some Karen leaders announced new regulations and claims on water rights. An expansion of cabbage land use is also evident. More Karen also are engaged in cabbage production. The political decentralization process is incomplete. Involvement of agencies and external groups should be increased. TAOs are currently in the early stages of political development for making decisions about local institutions and NRM.

5. Comparing the Impacts of Decentralization

The cases demonstrate efforts to spread and teach villagers’ participation with agencies and several other actors for managing natural resources under different conflict situations. Recently, new initiatives on decentralized water-resource management have encouraged one river basin committee (Upper Ping RBC) to establish a representative decision making body for water users. This is a decentralized body at river-basin level to represent water users, agencies, private sector, and NGOs.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Policy &amp; Strategy</th>
<th>Local and National Actors</th>
<th>Accountability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thailand: Chomthong: National Park Watershed Classification</td>
<td>TAOs (elected local governments), District Offices (administrative branches of central state), Watershed management network, Municipality, Irrigation user groups, Hmong and Karen villages, University researchers, NGOs, Media, Forestry Dept. and Irrigation Dept.</td>
<td>Shared decisions in irrigation, established rules for irrigation, representation of water users.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand: Sam Muen: Watershed classification, Wildlife Sanctuary</td>
<td>Forestry Department, University Researchers, Hmong, Karen, Lahu, and Lisu villages, TAOs</td>
<td>Participatory planning, mapping and land use monitoring, network of elected leaders, regulations, and shared decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand: Mae Tho-Omlong: Watershed Classification</td>
<td>Hmong and Karen villages, TAOs, Districe Office, Forestry Department</td>
<td>Community forest agreements, forest demarcation, Elected leader</td>
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The three cases indicate the joint efforts of many actors involving in the projects with “participation” approach and process, which involves local communities and resource users under different conflict levels and parties. Shared decisions and participation in rule making and agreements establish a norm for resource use and management among villagers, and among different ethnic groups and cultures.

Some differences in NRM issues related to negotiation for participation of local groups, and a practice in decentralization could be summarized.

Chomthong case involves several groups of actors who have clearly opposing views on community-based resource management, national park and watershed management. A major issue brought into discussion and negotiation is related to “community rights and access” and participation of all stakeholders of the upstream and downstream villages of lowland farmers and ethnic farmers. The decision making and negotiation have been clearly intervened in different external allies (NGOs, university researchers, local politicians, media, etc.). The conflict problem has been elevated to be on the national agenda, and is being discussed and defended in the community forest law draft. Information and land-use survey or monitoring were not well distributed to the public. Issues of ethnic people’s rights were also discussed. The protest was organized with all cultural symbolic and constitutional rights defined. Citizenship of marginal groups was brought up in relation to their participation in decision making.

Sam Muen Case indicates an initiative of the middle-level leaders of RFD to increase the roles of local communities in co-management of watershed forest and land use. An active participation of local ethnic communities to learn together on land-use problems and deforestation. A participatory planning and monitoring function helps to increase shared information on the agreed principles and patterns of resource use, allocation, and conservation. Compared to Chomthong and Mae Tho-Omlong Case, this is different practice of political decentralization which can be developed by joint efforts of several actors and allies of local and agency and researcher groups. Local leaders emphasize common understanding and rule making and enforcement, “watershed forest governance.” Mapping
and land-use monitoring have provided critical information for the village committee and watershed network/committee to make decisions on management plan, land use, rules, and enforcement.

This case has received media review and documentation. The success of participation and decentralization in NRM was well documented and learned about widely. During 1988 to 90, many NGOs were working on local knowledge and village forests. Some of them came to learn from the success in Sam Muen and Chiang Rai the watershed networking and alliances at the watershed level are more appropriate. Moreover, the first initiative on community forest law draft was prepared by a few agency leaders within RFD. This led to a wide concern among NGOs. Public forum was first organized by a group of agency leaders. Then, an agenda on rights and law draft became NGOs’ major agenda item and focus of negotiation. The impact is clearly a political decentralization process.

Mae Tho-Omlong Case is an ethnic and land-use conflict between Karen and Hmong. There was cooperation between agency and university to respond to the requests of Karen of Omlong and neighboring communities. Karen leaders took the initiative to implement participatory watershed management project and sought external funding. Karen leaders encouraged local NRM network to increase participation of both women and children. Land-use planning and forest demarcation were used to make decisions on conservation activities and land-use monitoring. This case evidently achieved inter-ethnic group agreement on general land-use and forest conservation. Rules are jointly made. But rules are mostly followed and enforced by Karen. The case emphasizes watershed forest governance. Few cases of conflict continued. However, Karen conservation and sustainable land-use practice catch public attention. Media also has taken key roles in spreading Karen conservation and decentralized NRM.

Political decentralization is continuing process. TAOs are working to experiment with and practice new responsibilities and representation. In many areas, TAOs and some of NRM committees are weak and working under close supervisions of the central organization and authority. Administrative decentralization is practiced. However, representation and elections
are now re-adjusted to improve more active participation. Also, TAOs, a new local
government structure, will be strengthened to take key roles in most decision making, rule
establishment and enforcement, including NRM governance and organizations. Water user
organization and river basin committees will represent all water users for making decisions on
water rights and allocation under the legal framework of the future water law.