

Report, Field Trip 2:

Before coming to Mae Sa, our location was introduced to us as a site with heavy air pollution (at certain times), forest degradation and an ethnic minority (a village of Karen) at the center of it. Lots of other issues were important as well, like massive corn plantation or the population's dept.

On our way there we noticed how important roads were – the village lies in the middle of the mountain region, Thailand's highest mountain Doi Inthanon not so far away. Almost all vehicles we encountered were either pickups or motorcycles. Internet connectivity was not 100%, but still available most of the time.

How are all of these issues connected? What are the roles of youth and women? And in which way is the Karen livelihood connected to it? These were the questions we wanted to find out in the field.

Learning outcomes

The most important finding is how close each of the single issues are connected. Cash crops have been introduced to the area in the 80's through development projects. Corn was chosen, because live stock industry in Thailand is on the rise (almost all corn is only for animal consumption). People were able to trade corn in for money, but have to go into dept to buy seeds, fertilizer and pesticides. Maize residue is being burned for clearing space, but also produces large amount of haze, which affects the area during the time between February and May and threatens people's health.

Money is not only used for goods, but for the education for the children as well, who have to leave the village for higher educational degrees. This weakens the social structures in the village, as the young ones are being introduced to different life styles and are looking for job opportunities elsewhere.

Ideas to make the village more independent from crop companies involve ideas like selling textiles or building a small damn, which would help to harvest rice more than once a year. Here another problem comes into place: The Thai government denies the Karen any land rights. Most of the area was gained the status of protected forests and ethnic minorities who settled there are only tolerated, but don't have any legal foundation for staying there. This also involves using

land for various farming, including actually crop. It seems the government wants the villages to stay in legal limbo, where ethnic minorities are not sure what they are allowed to do. To confuse them further, improvements by the government have been introduced to the area, like roads or phone/internet connectivity, so it is hard to tell, how much Thai authorities are committed to help the people living in the area.

Insights concerning transdisciplinary research

Mae Sa village was already center of academic interest. The villagers seem to be aware of certain issues and have learned how to organize themselves on a local level against governmental actions through NGO work and networking. At first it was frustrating from a social studies point of view, when asking what kind of issues there are to be solved. Agrar chemists to help analyse the soil, engineering to help building dams, these weren't things we could be useful. Mae Sa villagers already seemed to have a good idea what help was best for them.

At the end of our stay though there was a moment we really felt how to connect with the Karen in a transdisciplinary way. One of the most engaged and active community members asked us, if we could commit to their cause. They were used to scholars from the outside, to only come to them during certain times of the year. He invited us to stay at the village for a year, to see the whole circle of village life, especially during dry season. We were asked to present an academic outside point of view and help with issues which came up only recently, like helping to set up a facebook shop, show them how social media works and so on.

Relevance for own work

The research insights we gained were quite helpful for my own work. At first I concentrated on ecological issues, but soon we gained a more holistic view on the situation of the Karen. The haze problem was only a small part of the villager's issues land use rights, modernization and social change played an important role as well. Well aware of most of these problems, Mae Sa villagers are already looking for solutions and are open for suggestions and help from the outside. They started the promising Mae Chaem project as well as a "60 days no burning"-project during the most problematic time of the year concerning the haze problem. Since research already has been done to some degree, our current findings just have to connect with the old ones and can update them.

Open questions and challenges

A one year research project sounds very tempting and is quite understandable from the villager's point of view, but is not easy to commit to from our side. Funding is not easy to get access to and implementing the proper research methods into the field takes time to learn, as well as there are language barriers.

Other questions touch the issue of awareness of other problems, which touch topics like social change through modernization and are not so easy to answer. How much are Karen prepared for these changes, when children's desire are becoming stronger to participate in modern activity through social media, online games and so on?

And sometimes, certain problems look just too big to handle. How to engage the land rights issue? Is there even an achievable solution to this problem? It seems unrealistic that authorities will change the status quo into something the Karen and other ethnic minorities benefit from.



Ricefield of the Karen people, where we engaged in participatory observation



The river that is partially redirected goes through the rice field. A small dam would help the villagers to harvest rice more than once a year.



KNOTS has been funded with support from the European Commission. This report reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Weaving provides one source of income, where villagers don't go into dept. But they want to learn about more distribution channels, like Facebook shops.



Passion fruits are harvested, but only provide little income for Mae Sa village.



Corn is planted on almost every hill. According to law, agricultural use of the land is not always permitted.



Villagers show us where they plant coffee, but it is difficult to grow in many areas and doesn't grow any sellable beans until after three years of growth.