

Report, Field Trip 4:

Our group visited the Nor Lae village at the Thai-Myanmar border which is home to the ethnic Dara-Ang. The first Dara-Ang settlers migrated in the beginning of the 1980s: from Myanmar to Thailand due to ongoing conflicts between the Burmese army and various ethnic groups in Myanmar. In 1981 His Majesty, King Rama IX, visited the Royal Agricultural Station Angkhang where he met representatives of the Dara-Ang community, inter alia the former village headmen Na-Mo Man-Heung. King Rama IX granted the Dara-Ang permission to settle permanently in Thailand, close to the border to Myanmar. Hence, the Dara-Ang are strong devotees of the former King Rama IX and the Royal Family in general. Since 1989 the villagers are farming full-time and seasonal as agricultural workers under the Royal Project. Nowadays, the majority of villagers cultivate cash crops and temperate fruits for the project, e.g. strawberries, mushrooms, organic vegetables, tea, flowers, and herbs. Due to lack of arable land in the area of Nor Lae, many later or new settlers also use land on the Burmese side of the border for farming. Thus, they have to negotiate with Burmese soldiers the tax for their agricultural products. Others are working in tourism-related areas, for example sales of ethnic clothes and handicrafts, or are involved in cross-border trade from Thailand to Myanmar. Around 1200 Dara-Ang people live in Nor Lae today, however, only around 276 people have the Thai citizenship (Thai ID card). The majority holds a pink ID-Card and thus have limited access to civil and property rights, social and economic welfare, as well as higher education. Most of the Dara-Ang have a strong devotion to Buddhism.

Days in the Field

After we arrived at Nor Lae village, we were welcomed by the village headman, who gave us a brief overview of the Dara-Ang, and A-Une, the youth leader and son of the former village headman. Afterwards, we met the former village headman who talked with us about the Dara-Ang's history of migration. From both meetings we learned about central pillars of the daily lives of Dara-Ang people: the devotion to the King, farming under the Royal Project, the location close to the border, and their believe in Buddhism.

On our second day, A-Une, who accompanied us throughout the whole stay, gave us an introduction into cross-border trade from Thailand to Myanmar. We learned about the different groups of people carrying products across the Thai-Myanmar border, the role of the soldiers at the border, and the challenges of the cross-border trade. After a transect-walk through the village, we were able to observe the different steps of the cross-border trade: from the moment when the products were distributed to different carriers over how the soldiers checked the truck loaded with the trading products to the moment where the carriers crossed the border. In the afternoon, we met first and later Groups of Dara-Ang settlers in Nor Lae village (four men and one woman). During this session, we applied the methods of Timeline and Mapping in order to learn more about the Dara-Ang's perspective on the village and on their community. Here, the importance of the King and the Royal Project was stressed by the villagers once again.

Day 3 started off with a visit of the Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station Office where a representative gave us a brief introduction of the Royal Project, how it was initiated by King Rama IX and for what purposes. Afterwards, we visited the Ang Khang Royal Agricultural Station site where different cash crops were cultivated. In the afternoon, we met a farmer at his tea plantation site. He talked with us about farming under the Royal Project and striking issues with the Royal Project, inter alia land right issues and whether the farmer's needs are being considered by the authorities. Throughout the day, we could observe divergent perspectives and positions between the Dara-Ang villagers and the Royal Project staff.

On the fourth day, we were able to join a Buddhist ceremony at the city pillar. The aim of the ceremony was to prevent bad things to happen to the villagers and/or in Nor Lae. After that we had a meeting with a representative of the village committee where he talked with us about poverty reduction measures of the committee.

In the morning of the last day, we gathered as a group to reflect on our time at Nor Lae village, our findings and our research methods as well as on us as a research group. During this session, challenges and barriers, shortcomings and different hierarchies in place were addressed and discussed. Afterwards, we returned back to Chiang Mai.

Lessons learned and major outcomes

One of the major issues named by the villagers was the limited land - either for expansion of the village but also for farming. Here, we could observe a generational conflict on the position towards the Royal Project. Another issue identified by the villagers was the lack of citizenship which limits their employment or income possibilities. Furthermore, we observed strong gender hierarchies within the Dara-Ang community: While men are constructed as bearer of knowledge and decision makers, women are only portrayed as caretaker and as responsible for the household as well as workers.

At the end of each day, we had a group discussion where we reflected on our research and methods applied, our outcomes and planned the upcoming day. One lesson learned identified during our group discussion was the fact that we did not think about or considered the capacities of our interviewees before applying the methods, for example whether the villagers are familiar with writing or drawing. This was probably one reason why the implementation of some methods did not meet our expectations. Furthermore, some important aspects, for example the villager's dreams for their future, were too complex for them to draw within the map of their village. Another major issue was the language barrier. Therefore, we could not interact with the villagers in an informal way or on our own but needed translators for every kind of interaction. It would have also been good to have more feedback loops with the non-academic actors in place, so we could have an insight on their perspective not only on the meetings but also on us being there and carrying out research. We also recognised that it is important to step back as a researcher and to give non-academic actors more space to bring in their ideas and perspectives. One possibility therefore could be to endure moments of silence instead of immediately asking another question. This space for the non-academic actors might facilitate the identification of new or unaddressed issues.

One of the major insights concerning TDR was that trust is significant. Without trust, it is not possible to have access to the local community and gather data. Another lesson learned is that TDR cannot be applied within a short amount of time. There is, for example, no space for joint problem definition or co-production of knowledge. Furthermore, the given setting and agenda

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limited the possibilities for a TDR approach. Especially with regard to the agenda, following questions emerge: How and based on what criteria were the different non-academic actors chosen? Were they involved in the agenda setting process? What are the non-academic actors' motivations to participate and talk to us about those certain topics? Here, the static distinction between researchers and “informants” needs to reflect on.







