

Report, Field Trip 5:

Huay Hin Lad Nai is a small community of ethnic Karen located in Wiang Pa Pao district in the province of Chiang Rai, Northern Thailand. The village is settled nearby a river (which is also the namesake) and surrounded by and located in the middle of the forest. Our research team consisted of twelve people including students from Austria, Germany, Thailand, and Vietnam as well as Field Trip leaders and translators. We spent five whole days living in the village and were warmly welcomed and taken care of. The village consists of 21 households and approximately 107 people in total and is part of a four cluster system. The village's population divides into three major groups, namely the elders, the youth group, and the children. Furthermore, we have people like the forest monks, the spiritual leader and the headman of the village.

The village's agricultural resource management system includes organic farming, shifting cultivation (7 lands, 7 year cycle), rice cultivation (highland and wetland rice), agro-forestry and community forest management, corn, bamboo, tea, honey, and fruits. Traditional practices strongly depend on natural and forest resources, and the community forest provides for people's basic needs, i.e. food, herbs, and firewood. Despite using and taking the basic needs from the forest, the group claims to be *protectors of the forest*, which leads to a slogan that is found everywhere: *living in and with the forest*.

During this short period of time we learned about and tried to understand the villagers' way of living and the current political situation they are facing.

Major Findings:

Apart of gaining a lot of data related to education, division of labour, climate change and resource management, we are able to sum up the following major findings: The Huay Hin Lad Nai community, as an indigenous ethnic group, has been struggling to keep the sustenance of its traditional way of living. The area was declared a National Reservation Forest in 1982, and due to the prohibition of human settlement in the forest reserves, especially in the 1990s, the conflict between the government and the villagers deepened. This led to an order in 1992 which

forced the villagers to leave the forest. The village then formed alliances with other ethnic groups who were facing similar problems, and formed the *Northern Farmer's Network* (NFN) in order to be able to fight for their rights over the land.

On the one hand, the ethnic Karen must claim their rights for the land, which belongs to the government. On the other hand, they always need to prove that their way of living in the forest is not harming the area in any way. Therefore, the villagers are forced to have a constant need to show the government that it is possible to live in harmony with nature. They are doing so by using their identity which binds them together, and by inviting people from the so-called *outside* to educate about traditional culture, rituals and beliefs, and the sustainable management of forest resources.

Another finding is the (discursively) constructed dichotomy of the *inside* versus the *outside*. During the Field Trip, we were able to observe how well connected the villagers are to the outside: many of them own their own cars or motorbikes, making it easy to leave the village on business. Additionally, the younger generation can study abroad and/or in a nearby city, if given the chance. We also learned about the significance of the Youth Group as a mediator between the inside and the outside - they use mobile phones, the internet and social media (especially Facebook), and speak the Thai Language, further supporting business activities like selling products online or at a nearby market. This allows them to communicate, negotiate and share information with people outside of the village.

However, the people we encountered do not only use the political strategy mentioned above as a legitimisation tool, but also a political-economical one. Before being well connected to the outside, the villagers relied a lot on protests to fight for their rights. But since this did not help improve the general situation, they decided to diversify their negotiation strategy and strengthened their network with different kinds of actors, i.e. NGOs, researchers, neighbouring communities, organisations or institutions from both the public and the private sector. They also started a marketing business to sell organic products such as honey, using their own brand. Therefore, this finding is strongly connected to the other two previously mentioned.

Of further importance are the rituals and beliefs which are presented, represented, and also used as a political strategy of negotiation. The community has a strong connection to rituals and

beliefs, linking it with both the natural resource management and the way of living in the forest. For example, when a child is born, the villagers plant the umbilical cord in a string of bamboo, using it to ordain a tree in the forest in order to emphasise the child's strong connection with nature and the forest. The villagers explained that every person born into the community is part of the forest and affected by any harm done to it. A second example are the various ritual offerings to different deities to ensure a good harvest. We were able to see that people's beliefs gravely affect their behaviour and give them a purpose: protect and serve the forest. With their way of living, they are showing how they are using natural resources and that their cause is to protect them rather than exploit them. In order to do that, the community limits the number of collected plants like bamboo shoots and lets parts of the plant grow further. Furthermore, the villagers do not use any chemicals for cropping whatsoever to protect both land and forest. By our short visit, we witnessed them trying to use their evidence to demonstrate their way of living to the government and convince them that they do not wish to harm the forest in any way.

Methods:

Our Field Trip group has used various methods to collect data. First, there were the transect walk and non-participatory observation of the village. We wanted to get an overview of the village and the number of houses, including the school, temple and livelihood activities. The transect walk was carried out on the second day, when we went to the forest and rice field accompanied by a farmer and three members of the Youth Group. With this method, we also stopped to ask several questions about the things we saw along the way. This way, we learned about the art of collecting honey, the water system of the village, the collection of tea leaves, growing both wet and upland rice, and the traditional practice of rotational farming.

As a second method, we applied cognitive mapping in order to get some insights into the villagers' points of view about the most important things in their life. We asked about daily activities by letting people describe their livelihoods via the map. By doing so, we learned about routines and the daily life of some Youth Group members, the spiritual headman, several elders and a middle-aged couple.

Additionally, interviews were an essential method to conduct information during our field trip. We started with informal interviews to get to know some people and first insights into their

daily life. Afterwards, we conducted formal interviews, semi-structural and in-depth interviews in order to get more specific information related to a chosen topic. This way, we talked to some Youth Group members, the former village headman and the current village headman.

Lastly, participatory observation helped us get more information according to our interest.

Major learning outcomes:

In order to solve societal problems, it is always required to have enough time. This is always a crucial factor that challenges every successful project. Furthermore, local people should be included in research in an equal way.

Insights concerning transdisciplinarity:

The Field Trip demonstrated us that transdisciplinary research. on the one hand, can be quite challenging but on the other hand has a lot of benefits. Even though we opine that our different backgrounds (nationality, language and disciplines) lead to communicatory problems and high flexibility, we experienced that non-academic actors (in our case, the people living in the village) must be included in the research process equally. From the beginning we tried not to stick to a specific research question, but rather gain insights into the villagers' situation by listening to them and talking with them. It was important to us that knowledge exchange cannot only go in one direction, but instead must also always be included in the research team itself.

Challenges

According to the topic of the Summer School, we tried to apply the transdisciplinary approach in the field but faced lots of challenges and difficulties. The first challenge arose within the group itself, since each member came from a different background, which made it difficult to focus on combined matters and interests. Additionally, we had to keep in mind that we had to focus on the villagers' interests instead of our own, so personal interests had to be pushed back in favour of the group. Another challenge faced was the language barrier both within our group and the villagers, which led to lots of information lost due to the process of translation.

Due to the time limit and the time and effort being used for the translation, it was difficult to include the whole village into our research and get a good overview. Since we had to adapt to people's daily routines and their individual schedules, chances of meeting certain people were limited, so we always had to stay flexible in our planning. In some cases, we had to rely on selective engagement with the individuals who were willing to meet us in order to receive the needed data in a short period of time.

Benefits

In retrospect, even though we faced different challenges on a daily basis, each and every one of us gained lots of new experiences, new ideas and new perspectives. Regarding to the transdisciplinary approach and the awareness of the challenges that come along with it, it is possible to be successfully implemented if everyone puts in enough effort and has a good understanding of what it entails – it can work out if everyone works together!

After including different kinds of stakeholders and due to the time limit, it was possible for us to phrase a research question within our own research group (in the framework of an actual research project, we would have to include other stakeholders as well in order to actually fulfil the TDR approach).

Relevance for your own work:

This Field Trip gave the whole group as well as every individual person the chance to try out different kinds of methods such as (non-)participatory observation, transect walk and mapping – in many cases, we had to overcome certain (ethic) barriers and step out of our comfort zone. After a while, figuring out the way of applying certain methods and our own behaviour, we gained self-confidence and experience that can be quite beneficial to our future studies.

Open questions and challenges:

Due to time constraints, unfortunately we were unable to elaborate several topics we were interested in and create a holistic picture of the whole village, which made it very difficult for us to phrase a research question in such a short period of time. Other problems like the language

barrier, translation and the heterogeneity of our research group sometimes challenged the work basis, which was quite time consuming.

Thus, a joint solvation of given societal problems (like migration, social inequality and environmental change which were emphasised by the KNOTS project) was not possible.

Conclusion:

The community of Huay Hin Lad Nai verfügt über extensive local knowledge and wisdom. We have witnessed a strong exchange of knowledge within (since everyone has different skills, people are able to help each other), but also a strong want to foster the knowledge exchange with the so-called outside. There is a well-established collaboration with both academia and non-academic organisations (smaller, local ones and bigger NGOs), as well as state authorities. However, the community is still facing major challenges related to their way of living, resulting in people having to claim their rights again and again.

For further research projects, we would recommend working together with the Youth Group. The members we encountered were interested in getting to know us and our research interests, and they have proven to be very approachable. The Youth Group, as a whole, is already involved in the reconstruction of the village's history and identity under the aspect of Thai colonisation. Its members have done mapping and documentation of the community's use of land, they have collected proofs of legitimisation and sustainability, and might be interested in strengthening the village's position through regional and transnational networks by diversification and identification of political strategies – away from protests and confrontation to alliances and coalitions. There is a lot going on in the village, from alternative marketing strategies development of the local economy and neoliberal entrepreneurship, and we have basically found that the community's main problem is of political nature, and not a scientific one.