

Report, Field Trip 6:

Ban Doi Chang, an ethnic village on top of mountain of 1000-1700 meters above sea level, is located in Wawee Subdistrict, Mae Sruay District, Chiang Rai Province. The perfect combination of geography, topsoil, water resources and temperature of between 10-30oC all year long gives advantages of growing macadamia, plum, avocado, and especially, high quality Arabica coffee. There are more than 1000 households with around 10 thousand people living in the village and all of them rely on coffee production.



Ban Doi Chang, view from the Doi Chang View lookout

During the four days staying in the Doi Chang village, we did apply different method to collect information and obtained various viewpoints from different stakeholders including farm workers, farm owners, coffee companies, government agencies, teachers, students, a Buddhist monk, a Christian churchman in both Akha and Lisu ethnic groups, both men and women. At the end, we successfully defined the real problem of the village and through this process, working together, we understood more clearly on how to conduct a transdisciplinary research.

1. Major learning outcomes

The field trip was a memorable and educational experience for all of us. Some of the students have had experience doing field work and research before but for many of us this was the first time. So, the amount of what we learned individually varies but everyone was able to make new experiences and try out methods they have previously never used before. As a group we learned how to work together as a team, a process that to us the first and some of the second day. From

the second day on we split up because we learned that we needed to adjust our group size to the methods we used. Additionally, we had to figure out how to link each of our individual research interests to a joint one. And how to combine that with the problems raised by the villagers and the people we talked to and what is important to them. We figured the best way to do that would be to not be passionate about certain topic and figure out how to weave that in with the topics that are brought up by the people but to be passionate about the process of transdisciplinary research and problem solving.

On top of that, we were able to practice research methods like interviews, participant and non-participant observation, informal conversations, mapping and focus group interviews. But not only the technical side of doing it like how to ask questions, how long to wait until asking a new question, what to focus on when observing etc. but our field trip leaders also encouraged us to work on our notes and reflect on everything. For example, each of us was advised to keep a research journal and write down reflections on the same day.



Focus group interview with Christian farmers in a church

2. Insights concerning transdisciplinarity

We understand transdisciplinarity lesser as a method, rather as a concept and specific understanding of doing research. One point is interdisciplinarity, means that natural science and social science working together and bring in their different backgrounds. In TDR researchers deal with real life problems, set from the people. The personal interest stands in the second row, more important are the concerns within for example in a village. Another importance is knowledge co-production between academics and non-academics and the inclusion from local processes and local knowledge.

As one first and very important point we concluded, that for a transdisciplinarity approach it is necessary, that the people themselves invite researchers to come and work with them. They as the conserved persons have to be willing and see a reason to change something. For us it seemed like for many of the villagers it was not clear, for what exactly we had come to Doi Chang. As consequence we always landed in Q&A situations, where we asked questions and received an answer. It was hard to come to a dialogic situation. Further and interwoven with this thought, all participants have to be included from the first step on. Means they should attend, in this case, the Summer School with our lectures and discussions. In first line for us, the students, would this be a big enrichment to come out of an academic thinking pattern and bubble.



Interview with Miyo at Doi Chang coffee farm. There were nine of us and she herself alone.

One huge obstacle in the communication is the dependency on translation. Your chance to become active is slowed down and you are in need of a third person. The types of translation are so different, that your translator need clear instructions, how she or he should work. Regarding the used methods the researchers should reflect on the group sizes and if they fit the chosen method. We experienced, that it can lead to pressure for people that we meet if we arrive there in a group of ten, while they are alone. For the approach of TDR it's highly important, to reflect your position as an outsider and foreigner during the whole research. It needs trust and time, till people tell you open about their life, topics and problems. And again, the resolution to become active, has to come from insight and not from us as external actors. Another difficulty which can be mitigated with this are the power-relations from us as western academics towards villagers, which have been maybe faced stigmatization and oppression during their life. We should act as supporters, but the agency lies in their hands.

3. Relevance for our own work

The research in the village Doi Chang was for all the participants of the field trip very interesting and valuable. We followed a transdisciplinary and intersectional approach to get information about the village and existing inequalities in the community. We discovered how to use transdisciplinary methods in the field and got practice about a problem-solving approach of research. All participant of our group in Doi Chang studied new methods for the own research and academic work. At the first step we practised an open approach to learn about the village. The relevance for our own work is the knowledge we got from the villagers. We learned to be aware of the different context and setting research is being held and how strong power structures are involved.

4. Open Questions and Challenges

Because of the small time-frame we have not been able to go deep into the structures and topics in Doi Chang. So of course, there are unanswered questions and we have only scratched the whole picture. One reason for that was our, to the villagers, unclear position and aim and that they were not willing to tell us openly everything in detail. In short: a lack of trust. This has been one major challenge, especially if you try to work towards TDR. In terms of content we are not clear about the distribution of ownership and land in Doi Chang. This is especially important because of power hierarchies, for example between the different ethnic groups.

Regarding our methods we concluded, that they have to fit to the situation and that we have to

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be careful with a big group size, for example in interview situations. Some methods are good for children, like mapping, but for elders the request to draw something can be strange. So age is another factor. Because we have been foreigners in Doi Chang it was very helpful, that our Translators and Leaders are familiar with the language and the people. The barrier resulting from a lack of understanding if you do not speak the language was maybe the most obvious one. Every day we were confronted with our dependency on a translator and as the result the gap between the villagers and us researchers. Overall you cannot take it as given, that the people you want to work with agree to your kind of research, your ideas and planned methods. To which degree it is useful and possible to do research together from the beginning on is still open to us. In any case to do so you need to step away from your academic bubble, wording and type of thinking. Only then equal work is possible and you can make non-academics understand why it is useful for them to work with you.

In conclusion, one can say that although we were not able to truly do transdisciplinary research, the methods we tried and the experiences we made brought us a lot closer to it than we were before, and it gave us an idea how a TDR project could look like and a bit of experience to maybe find the confidence to conduct transdisciplinary research in the future.