

Report, Field Trip 8:



Figure 1: The view on Mekong River from Chiang Khong

Our Field Trip took place in Chiang Khong, Chiang Rai and addressed various topics, such as environment, gender, migration and mobility as well as inequality. As preparation, we discussed what to expect from the Field Trip and talked about possible research questions as well as different methodologies to be implemented during this time. We soon realized that this is not a favorable approach, as transdisciplinary research (TDR) aims to involve various - academic and non-academic - stakeholders in the first steps of the research process. The definition on which problems to address and questions to answer is optimally already a joint decision. So we decided to go to the Field Trip open-minded and ask the local people about their everyday issues. We met with various people and groups, never spending more than 2-3 hours with each of them. This meant that we gained insight into various issues of the region, some commonly shared among the different stakeholders. By asking about what is important to them in a very general way, we were careful not to impose predefined topics but rather to listen to what is being said and individual priorities. Talking to this many actors gave us a more comprehensive overview than previously expected (about the area and issues in Chiang Khong), but it made it difficult for us to discuss any issue in depth. Going on the Field Trip with an open mind was very important as some issues that we had previously assumed to be important to the people in Chiang Khong, for instance migration from Laos, were not seen as a problem.

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However, the emigration of young people to bigger cities seemed to have a great impact on the society. Additionally, child marriage and lacking of an official citizenship influence the ability to pursue higher education. This is something we could not have discovered if we had asked more closed, concrete questions.

One of our major learning outcomes was to experience the difficulties in practicing TDR. For this reason, we were astonished to see that the Mekong River School is already doing TDR without calling it this way. As a reflection of our own role, the stakeholders seemed to expect us to be part of the dissemination, to spread the word about the region and its issues. None of the actors saw us as active actors in their change processes, but rather as another mouthpiece for their cause. Some of the actors we visited cooperate with universities or wish to get more support from the local academic community. However, there is consensus that local collaborations are more useful and sustainable than working with external actors. In general, we observed that the Chiang Khong / Mekong community is already well organized and has implemented many processes and activities to improve their own situation. We were impressed by the degree of self-organization - there is a lot that we can learn from them.

We also learned how important it is to plan research activities in advance. In one case, we visited a morning market without thoroughly thinking about what we would do there in advance. Afterwards we talked about the market and realized that we missed so many opportunities that we could have taken advantage of, if we had only prepared beforehand. Furthermore, we discussed the importance of staying flexible, since even the best plan can and will never be able to be implemented perfectly and that, as researchers, we must be flexible enough to discard our plans, if necessary. Balancing the fine line between flexibility and planning, or in other words, remain open minded and focused at the same time, still is a difficulty when conducting TDR.

One major challenge for us was that we often talked to spokeswo_men rather than directly to the affected people. We had talks with village headmen or their assistants, with members of the Mekong River School, a CSO, and the Center for Girls, a NGO. In these cases the representatives acted as spokespeople and simultaneously as gatekeepers, since they had the power over what information to share and which information to keep from us, wittingly or unwittingly. Therefore, it was difficult - and in some cases impossible - for us to distinguish between unfiltered and filtered answers. Since we spend very little time with the various groups, we were treated as guests or even as “academic tourists”. Responding to the question whether

other research teams have visited them before, almost all of them answered with “yes, quite often” and stated that many of our questions overlap with those of other research teams.

For us, power relations were clearly visible in many cases. One striking example was our visit at the Lahu village. There, we were supposed to talk to the women’s group, however, all our questions were answered by the male village head-man while the women kept mostly silent - even though the majority of questions were directly directed at them. Also, since the women were most affected, it would have been more relevant for our research. Taking from our experience, we couldn’t help but wonder if it even is possible to approach the affected people directly. Accordingly, the founder of the NGO “Women for Change” emphasized that it took her three years to establish a standing in this village. In this context, it seems that trust or even friendship are keys in research that give greater access to the research site. Trust, respect and appreciation, therefore, appear to be important parts of TDR, but, as shown above, can be very difficult to achieve.



Figure 2: Interviewing the Village Headman and the women in the Lahu village

The issues we looked at were often connected to bigger contexts. The fluctuation of the water level, which was mentioned by many people we talked to, is controlled by Chinese companies building dams in the upstream country. Another example showing the interrelation of issues is the that a lack of income prevents many families from gaining an official citizenship which, in turn, further decreases the ability to access higher education. This leads to the question: Should TDR be limited to a certain part of an issue, such as how to handle the

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changing water levels, or should the goal should be to address “bigger” issues more holistically. Furthermore, how can TDR cope with the complexity and examine the interrelations?

In respect of timely restrictions to analyze social-ecological transformation of the region, one major challenge we faced was the tight schedule of the Field Trip, leaving us with only four to five days to conduct our research. The lack of our own experiences in conducting research as well as the schedule limited our ability to implement “real” TDR methods. Apart from this, we found our group size highly challenging and counter-productive. We often arrived as a group and interviewed the stakeholders together. Not only did our presence seem to overwhelm some actors but the number of researchers hindered us in asking more detailed questions and follow a proper structure. Smaller groups or even doing interviews individually at times would have been more fruitful. Additionally, it seemed that information and context got lost through translation. Even though we had skilled translators, misunderstandings of questions or simplified / selected translations of long, content-rich statements were unavoidable. One of our translators, as she was involved in the communal social movement, added her own thoughts to the translation, which made it difficult for us to distinguish between her and other options.



Figure 3: Interviewing the Boat Driver split into smaller groups at Mekong river

With all this being said, many challenges that we faced were continuously discussed within our group. We realized that some things can't be influenced by us but still need to be considered and reflected upon. Other things can be changed. We viewed challenges during the Field Trip as a chance to learn, and will hopefully improve our future work by using this experience.

We worked very well together as a group. We all contributed ideas and thoughts during the reflection times, which our Field Trip Leader, Siya Uthai, made sure we had every evening. We sat down together every evening for about two hours to discuss what we had experienced and learned during the day, and with this we could improve our approaches daily and could include previous insights into the following days.

Overall, the research was an enriching experience. It gave us the chance to practice different methodologies on-site that many of us had previously just discussed in class. All of the students in our group will use the Field Trip for our future work, since we all will write and publish papers on the Mekong River or on TDR in one way or another. But we also discussed the importance of the Field Trip and TDR experience for our future in general. Doing actual research in the field taught us a lot, and we experienced how difficult it must be to do TDR and how much time it would take. But as we saw in the Mekong River School, TDR can be found in various contexts, in academic and non-academic or combined contexts. So, valuing different perspectives from different actors and integrating ideas and knowledge and creating new ones is something that we can use in every work situation and in private life.



Figure 4: Group “Mekong 8” on our way to the observation of cross-border trade at Mekong river