

Reflections on Thai Civil Society

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In this series of papers, KEPA publishes reflections on the state of civil society in the countries in which it operates (Cambodia, Laos, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Thailand, Vietnam). These reflections, based on KEPA's own work with its partners, member organisations and their partners in the country, provide an overview and highlight some current issues and developments in the role of civil society organisations.

Civil society consists of many different actors from small informal activist groups to big institutionalised organisations. In these reflections, civil society organisation (CSO) is used as an overall concept to cover all these actors. The term **NGO** is used only if it specifically refers to registered, institutionalised non-governmental organisations, while **CBO** stands for community-based organisation. **INGO** refers to international non-governmental organisations.

KEPA in Thailand

In the Mekong region countries (Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam), KEPA operates from a regional office based in Bangkok. KEPA Mekong forms partnerships with civil society actors to support them in influencing development policy processes in the region. Partnerships are linked to KEPA's key policy themes: development cooperation, global economic policies and climate justice.

In Thailand, KEPA has mainly been working on two issues – international trade and climate change. On trade, KEPA has cooperated with FTA Watch, which is a network of Thai organisations monitoring free trade agreements. On climate change, KEPA has cooperated with another coalition of CSOs, the Thai Working Group for Climate Justice (TCJ). TCJ monitors the key official meetings on climate change and voices the concerns of poor and marginalised groups in climate policy formulation. KEPA has also supported the Sustainable Development Foundation's (SDF) project in Southern Thailand on sustainable coastal resource management and on raising the local fisher communities' awareness on the impacts of climate change, as well as helping them cope with them.

KEPA Mekong has supported several regional initiatives and networks, as many of the development challenges have common regional dimensions. Among them are two public seminars on the Mekong River water management as well as a regional CSO climate change workshop. These events have drawn wide participation from all four lower Mekong countries, and even from Burma and China.

Historical background

The emergence of modern NGOs in Thailand had its roots in the democracy movement spearheaded by student activists, intellectuals and the middle class who fought against military governments and injustice during the 1960-70s. The first Thai NGO, Thai Rural Reconstruction Movement, was established in 1969. However, volunteer activism and NGOs started to grow only after the democratic uprising in the mid-1970s, and consolidated their position in the 1980s.

Contacts and cooperation between NGOs focusing on similar issues are relatively good. The Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NGO-CORD, later renamed NGO-COD) was one of the earliest established umbrella organisations for development NGOs and CBO networks. NGO-COD has demanded changes in development paradigms and policies, and lobbied for more and better community rights and the decentralisation of political power.

Many Thai NGOs are actually registered as foundations. There are approximately 14,000 NGOs and private foundations in Thailand. Most of them are not volunteer- or membership-based and they rely on external funding. The number of NGOs providing social and development services is rather small compared to the neighbouring countries. Many of the NGOs have campaign and advocacy activities, acting as watchdogs following government policies. Critical Thai NGOs have faced resistance from almost all Thai governments.

Main actors in Thai civil society

In addition to NGOs, people's organizations and social movements are considered as the other main actors of Thai civil society. People's organizations are the Thai equivalent to community-based organisations. They are organisations

established and run at the grassroots level without interference from NGOs or the government. Most of them work on local issues. Some of the strongest people's organizations and their networks (e.g. Assembly of the Poor, Fisherfolk network) have been able to influence national policy-making processes. In many cases NGOs have provided information, media contacts, and capacity building for these organisations.

The biggest number of CSOs in Thailand are working on health issues, such as HIV/Aids, consumer protection, health information and basic services provision at the community level as well as national health policy advocacy. On HIV/Aids, for example, CSOs have been working to ensure that those affected have access to medication and are able to live in society with dignity.

The second main group are the environmental CSOs working on issues of natural resource management and community rights. Several CSOs work for the land rights of the communities living in state-owned forests or in national parks. They call for community rights and community forest legislation in forest management instead of Thailand's outdated and rigid forest laws.

Some environmental CSOs work on pollution issues protesting the government plans that promote heavy and polluting industry, including coal-fired power plants. These organisations criticise the role of industry in increasing competition over natural resources and exacerbating climate change. These CSOs are also demanding that the government have a target for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

As Thailand is a major agricultural producing and exporting country, there are a number of CSOs working on agricultural issues. These CSOs promote sustainable or organic farming practices. They have urged the government to ban the importation of dangerous chemicals and to provide support to small-scale farmers.

There are a number of CSOs working on human rights issues, such as ethnic minority rights, migrant labour rights, freedom of media and supporting people affected by the ongoing violence in three Southern provinces.

As Thai companies have sought investments in neighbouring countries, some Thai CSOs have expanded their work to the regional level and established networks with CSOs in other countries. For example, the Mekong Energy and Ecology Network (MEE Net) is monitoring the energy and electricity policies and governance of the Mekong countries. The Save the Mekong Coalition, a network of CSOs in the Mekong region, monitors the Mekong river water management issues.

Government-civil society relations

The most significant event for Thai civil society in 2010 was the demonstration organised by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or “Red Shirts”, which ended with violence and over 90 deaths in Bangkok in April-May. The Red Shirts demanded the Prime Minister Aphisit Vejjajiva to dissolve parliament and organise new elections, accusing his government of a constitutional coup. However, others argue that the Red Shirt demonstration was politically motivated, and that it was organised and financially supported by the exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and thus was not a genuine civil society movement.

In any case, civil liberties were curbed, as the Thai government imposed a state of emergency in 24 provinces. The emergency decree allowed the authorities to impose curfews, ban public gatherings of more than five people, detain suspects without charge for 30 days and censor any news that “causes panic”. Since April 2010, several satellite television stations, online television channels, publications,

community radio stations and more than a thousand websites have been shut down. The government claimed that there was a group of people attempting to overthrow the monarchy by using the internet. These measures destroyed the image of Thailand as a country with a free media that used to be praised by other countries.

On other issues, the relationship between the government and CSOs remained stable or even improved compared to previous years and previous governments. For example, the government was responsive on natural resource management issues, and there were some victories for people’s movements on long-standing struggles, such as community forest legislation and the declaration of the Map Ta Phut industrial estate as a pollution zone. Thus, politically neutral CSOs and those working on less political issues could continue to work normally as there were no new legal instruments to regulate their activities.

Current issues and latest developments

In the aftermath of the Red Shirt protests and crackdown, the government announced a national reconciliation process, including a national reform panel, a truth commission investigating the deaths, media reform, and constitutional amendments. The process has, however, been very slow.

The draft “National Master Plan on Climate Change 2010-2019” developed by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP) became a focus of national campaigning and advocacy in 2010 for the Thai Working Group for Climate Justice (TCJ). This master plan is to be used as a policy guide for parties working on issues of climate change adaptation and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The planned budget for these actions is almost 10 billion Baht (250 million euros).

Thai civil society's initial critique of the draft master plan included the following points: (1) it does not include any measures to curb greenhouse gas emissions from industry and the energy sector; (2) proposed mitigation measures and projects do not promote low-carbon industries and energy generation; (3) mitigation measures promote regarding forests as carbon sinks – pursuing REDD/REDD+ projects can lead to violation of indigenous people's rights; (4) adaptation measures in the agricultural sector prioritize big agro-business instead of fostering the adaptation capacity of small-scale farmers; (5) there are no clear measures to support the adaptation capacity of small-scale coastal fisheries. In late November 2010, over 700 people representing 31 organizations led by the TCJ organized a campaign and submitted a petition to the prime minister, asking him to stop the master plan development process. The prime minister responded to this in January 2011 by instructing ONEP to revise the plan.

After the hiatus in the regional free trade negotiations between the EU and ASEAN, EU trade representatives have been pushing hard for negotiations between the EU and individual ASEAN member countries. Despite the current government's interest in starting negotiations with the EU, the political situation in 2010 made it impossible for the government to do so. Thanks to the CSO coalition FTA Watch's successful campaigns and subsequent constitutional changes, the government has to conduct comprehensive public consultations and get approval from parliament before the trade negotiations can begin.

On water resources management, the civil society network Save the Mekong Coalition organized a conference to address the issue of severe drought along the Mekong river and the Mekong mainstream dams, and invited the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Chinese Embassy in Thailand as well as civil society

and government representatives from all Mekong countries to openly discuss the situation.

Later in 2010, the Save the Mekong Coalition and communities along the Mekong river wrote several petitions to the MRC and to governments in the region on the imminent threat to livelihoods and food security from the 12 dams planned downstream, such as the Xayaburi dam in Northern Laos. Largely thanks to the regional civil society action, public consultations, pressure from international donors, and downstream countries' concerns over negative transborder impacts, in April 2011, the Lao government agreed to review its plans regarding the Xayaburi dam project. The MRC ministerial meeting was expected to decide over the fate of the dam project in late 2011.

Funding for civil society actors

CSO financing has been drying up in Thailand for several years, since many international donors withdrew from Thailand when it achieved middle income country status. Many CSOs depend on external funding amounting to 70-90 per cent of their budgets. They have faced difficulties in securing their financial sustainability and many have decided to close down. As critical CSOs have not received funding from the Thai government, public funding resources are not evenly distributed among Thai CSOs.

To some extent, public funding institutions such as the Thai Health Promotion Fund have been able to meet the financial needs of Thai CSOs. The Thai Health Promotion Fund was established after the enactment of the Thai Health Bill in 2001 and its revenue comes from tobacco and alcohol taxes. Because their funding is restricted to health issues, some local CSOs have included health issues in their work in order to receive funding. In 2010, ten CSO pilot projects on climate change adaptation also received support

from the Fund.

Fostering social enterprise is another strategy that Thai CSOs are using to achieve financial sustainability. For instance, the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), a major CSO, has operated restaurant and hotel chains to generate income. For small CSOs, however, such business ideas are difficult to implement.

A weak and uncritical CSO community in Thailand would be detrimental not only to Thailand, but to certain extent also to the other countries in the Mekong region. In the absence of a strong and critical civil society in the neighbouring countries, Thai CSOs have a key role in ensuring that the policies of development actors in the region are kept under scrutiny.

Role of INGOs

Since Thailand is a middle-income country, INGOs in the country generally target the most marginalised groups such as refugee or migrant population, or collaborate with regional CSO networks. Major international NGOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid work towards strengthening the capacity of local CSOs for advocacy. However, development organisations tend to use Thailand as their regional base and

operate only minor programmes in the country. They mostly provide funding to their partners and maintain a low profile.

Thailand is also a hub for several international research, watchdog and campaign NGOs, such as International Rivers, which is an expert on water management issues, or the Bank Information Centre, which monitors the policies and performance of multilateral development banks. These expert organisations have contributed greatly to local CSOs in Thailand by producing information, analysing policies and creating connections with other civil society groups in the North. As they possess in-depth expertise in specific sectors, they can consolidate local concerns and realities to tackle international policies.

This kind of work done by Northern CSOs is generally appreciated by local CSOs and considered as an added value. The sharing of expertise is seen as one of the best practices in cooperation between local CSOs and INGOs. However, it must be done in a manner that ensures the participation of local CSOs so that they receive the necessary expertise and know-how. Thai CSOs are careful of retaining their independence and their right to determine their own agenda.

Finnish CSOs in Thailand

In 2010, there were four Finnish CSOs and three Finnish foundations supporting local partners and implementing projects in Thailand. The Finnish CSOs either target the most marginalised groups in the country or support the various regional CSO networks based in Thailand. In addition to the national projects in Thailand, FIDA and SASK have regional programmes in which Thailand is one of the target countries.

Name of Finnish CSO	Name of Thai partner(s)	Number of projects in Thailand	Sector(s) of work
FIDA International	Full Gospel Churches of Thailand	1	Capacity building, tsunami reconstruction
Finnish Refugee Council	Karen Women's Organization, Karen Youth Organization	1	Burmese refugees
Frikyrkling Samverkan	Thailand Karen Baptist Convention	1	Social services for the disabled
Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland SASK	International Transport Federation	1	Labour unions
ABILIS Foundation	Asia-Pacific Network for Independent Living Centres, the Foundation to Encourage the Potential of Disabled Persons	2	The disabled
The Finnish NGO Foundation for Human Rights KIOS	FORUM-ASIA	1	Human rights
Siemenpuu Foundation	Foundation for Ecological Recovery, Focus on the Global South, Thai Working Group for Climate Justice	2	Energy & environment, climate change