

THAILAND

Structural violence in the southern provinces



Numerous conflicts in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have resulted in communities being abandoned and families broken. Social problems abound in these largely Muslim communities, which are both ethnic Thai and Malay. Rice fields have become idle while large-scale industries are partly depleting natural resources along with the livelihoods of local communities. It is important to appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of local peoples in order to foster the cultural coexistence needed to prevent them from being branded as “separatist”.

Social Agenda Working Group
Ranee Hassarungsee
(translated by Suntaree Kiatiprajuk)

Since 2004, the Research Team on Local History and Culture of the Thailand Research Fund has been conducting gender-related research among the dominant Muslim populations, both ethnic Thai and Malay, in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.¹ Among these Muslim populations, who most often live in separate communities from non-Muslims, the status of men has declined owing to their reduced income from indigenous small-scale fishing and agriculture. Commercial fishing trawlers, capitalist shrimp farming and industrial development projects have taken away nearly all fishing grounds and farmland. With little education and rapidly declining fishing resources, these indigenous fishers are obliged to seek work in factories or become migrant workers in Malaysia.

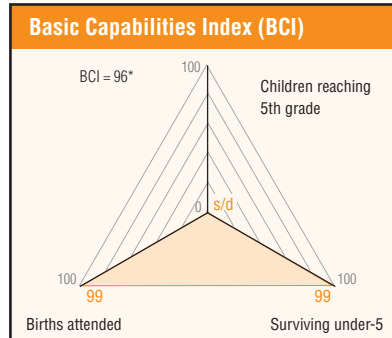
As a result of these changes, women have had to increase their household production, selling products in the villages and markets and also working in the factories. However, they can no longer stay in their local communities and some have migrated for work in Malaysia alongside the men, or some have found work in leisure industries.

As these changes began to upset the environmental, economic and social balance of Muslim communities, government and private sector development projects were introduced, worsening this loss of equilibrium by bringing in outsiders and reducing control by the local population of natural resources as well as economic and political decision-making. Traditional institutions, such as families, communities, local administration, district chiefs, and village heads could not survive, while no new institutions emerged to replace them. This environment fostered the emergence of militants throughout these communities.

Volatile issues such as unequal access to justice and state benefits, as well as mutual mistrust among Muslims and Buddhist Thais have fuelled ongoing

* One of the BCI components was imputed based on data from countries of similar level.

1 A workshop to help people deal with the situation in the three southern provinces was organized by the Social Agenda Working Group, Thai Health Promotion Foundation and allies, in June 2007.



conflict and violence. However, villagers, development workers, students and academics all point out that, contrary to media reports, the conflict is not about religious issues or racial origins.

Globalized competition for resources

Domestic and foreign capitalist enterprises have already grabbed a vast area of farmland and public lands. Today, a growing number of profiteers are robbing a large number of poor Muslims of even their customary housing and land rights. When outsiders entered, they mistreated the local population, instead of accepting their traditions and becoming part of the communities. To the devout Muslims, housing areas and farmland belong to Allah, but in the capitalist world, land is a personal property that can be traded. Therefore, land purchases and competition for land ownership as well as the occupation of public fertile lands are widespread.²

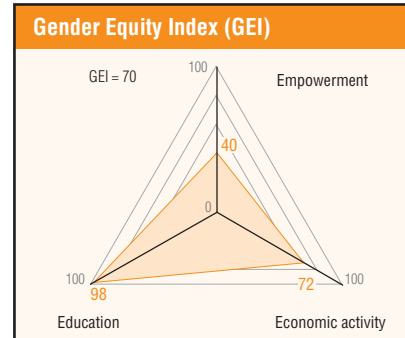
While the current armed conflict may end, so long as structural violence – especially regarding the use of natural resources – is not addressed, it is likely to recur within four or five years.³ The people must come together to find ways to untangle this complicated problem.

People’s roadmap to peace

Studies have shown that the conflict in these provinces goes beyond a dispute between the “local population” and the “Thai State”. It is also a reaction

2 Srisak Vallibhodom, “Will the southern fire be quenched?”, paper given at a seminar organized by the Social Agenda Working Group, Lek-Prapai Viriyaphan Foundation and Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, 2006.

3 See “Tackling conflict for development: principles, progress and challenges”, a paper prepared for the UK Department for International Development, 2006.



against globalization, with opposing factions within the communities and also collaborative action between locals and outsiders. This conflict has involved families, communities, society and also an entire way of life and of using resources.⁴

Since only the locals know their reality, any solution to the ongoing conflict – be it confrontation or submission – should come from them; outsiders are not in a position to determine what is right or wrong. Will the local population allow the next generation to keep killing each other or will they wait for the outcome of the struggle? If the provinces succeed in gaining a certain degree of autonomy, they may face new dangers, in the form of conflict between the old and the new generation.

To avoid this outcome, people need to come together to build new alternatives, organizing across religious differences to develop alternative economic, political and cultural institutions to enable them to control the influx of outsiders and their destruction of social resources. They have to seek alternative cultural and economic approaches that could respond to global changes and negotiate with wider society.

Importance of local community rights

Formerly, when locals were empowered by their sense of community, they were capable of negotiating with the government as well as with outsiders. For instance, outsiders view natural resources as separate from human resources, without considering the close relationship between them and discounting ecology or biodiversity, which are

4 This and the section on resource management and community justice are based on Srisak Vallibhodom, seminar on ecological culture in southern border and life security, April 2007.

fundamental to the local communities. Based on generations of traditional knowledge, the Buddhist Thais and the Muslims knew which resources were useful for which purposes, which were medicinal and which poisonous.

The State typically considers people to be technical resources, valuing intelligence over morality, thereby undermining Buddhists' traditional idealism. A great deal could be learned from Muslims' perspectives on nature and religion. Muslims, local peasants, including the community spiritual leader, pay more attention to people's goodness, and oppose mainstream values.

Local research has described how the locals, both Buddhists and Muslims, lived in harmony with nature, turning an ecological system into an ecological culture. Buddhists and Muslims shared their use of natural resources by asking the *Toh khru* (Islamic teacher) to help in establishing common rules. In this ecological culture, in which everyone believed in collective obligations to the homeland, Buddhists and Muslims lived in a sympathetic social structure. With the influx of outsiders, equipped with "modern" and scientific thinking, humans are viewed as living robots.

Natural resource management and local community justice

The local communities of yore had adopted many resource management tools, including a local judiciary system based on shared community norms and values. The current law enforcement and judicial system, ranging from the police to the court, has not been able to integrate these norms, making it unable to adequately address community conflicts. Conflicts over inheritance, for example, are no longer resolved by the justice imam, as prescribed by traditional or *shari'a* law, but are also not resolved according to the Thai laws. In such cases the concerned parties typically went to a well-respected community leader, who might or might not be an imam, and detailed their assets and positions as to their allocation. The community leader would then propose a division that followed neither *shari'a* nor Thai laws exactly but could satisfy both parties. Such a course was so honoured among community members that dishonest people did not dare to disagree with the decision.⁵

As these mechanisms have been replaced, people find themselves no longer in control of local resources. A case in point was the capitalists' occupation of all the coastal areas, leaving small-scale local fishers unable to continue to make a livelihood. A vast area was cleared for oil palm plantations but the local villagers could not voice their opposition.

Knowledge-based alternatives: creating collective local awareness

Groups from the Faculty of Science and Technology Prince of Songkhla University (PSU), Pattani Campus, working on peat swamps, sand dunes and mangrove forests, and dealing with local people in resource management, have found that to regenerate a communal spirit or sense of belonging, four things are needed:

- Natural resources and the environment;
- Traditions, beliefs, religion and culture;
- Groups, organizations, and networks;
- A strong body of knowledge.

These four elements can be developed through an integral learning process that becomes a complementary and relevant part of people's lives, enabling the local community to sustain itself. Ideally, these four ingredients will merge into a community sense of belonging. In practice however, this merging depends on a variety of factors related to community security. So, to bring about community security, the relationship of the four components must be harmonious and balanced. This relationship could be expanded via participatory resource management activities.

A local knowledge bank should be created to promote local peoples' awareness of their own history, wisdom, culture and way of life, as opposed to that of the State. With such firmly established knowledge and wisdom of their own, the local communities will be adequately resourced to deal with the changes brought by globalization.

This undertaking requires that local communities work together to understand various aspects of ecological culture so that they can negotiate among themselves and prevent outsiders from taking advantage of them. Local and community organizations, such as the Shura council, have to be established to facilitate peaceful negotiations within the communities. This would enable new generations to understand the value of old ways of doing things and the dangers posed by consumerist culture. Local communities in the three southern provinces should communicate more with the entire country's society in order not to be quickly branded as a "separatist movement". Learning from the local people's uniqueness and diversity has the potential to bring about a cultural coexistence that can lead to collective nationalism. ■

⁵ The same happened in Nidhi lawswong's closure of the workshop on how to deal with different situations in the three southern provinces, organized by the Social Agenda Working Group and allies, June 2007.