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Forest Access and Governance:

A case study on Karen community forestry in Chiang Mai
Province, Northern Thailand.

Master Thesis

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1 Introduction and problem statement

Deforestation and biodiversity loss remain compelling policy concerns in Southeast Asia, where the highest relative rate of deforestation of any major tropical region is evidenced (Sodhi, *et al.*, 2004). Notwithstanding Thailand's logging ban in 1989, illegal logging and forest conversion have continued (Thomas, *et al.*, 2004). Recently the Royal Forest Department (RFD) transforms remaining forests into sites, classified as Protected Areas (PAs). The debate on whether PAs restrict community development opportunities and increase poverty or whether they generate new income by attracting tourism, inducing infrastructure development, or increasing the flows of economically significant environmental services has been poorly informed by the lack of rigorous empirical evidence (Sims, 2010). However, when basic knowledge on diverse social-ecological systems (SESs) is missing, regulating governmental intervention on the interactions between humans and forest results in a loss of local ecological knowledge (LEK) and governance practices. Ostrom, *et al.*, 1999, suggest that users who largely depend on a resource for a major portion of their livelihood, and who autonomously design their own access and harvesting rules, are more likely than others to perceive benefits from their own restrictions. Further, if users are interested in the sustainability of the particular resource the expected joint benefits tend to outweigh current costs. An initial trust among users to keep promises will facilitate low-cost methods of monitoring and sanctioning. Community-based forest management in Thailand has a long tradition in rural communities. The villagers believe that they cannot maintain the subsistence livelihood if the forest is excluded or not taken care of. Yet, only about 20 years ago, Community Forestry (CF) was officially recognized in Thailand as a tool for sustainable forest management (Wichawutipong, 2005). Nevertheless, a proposed CF Bill has still not been approved which is the reason why CF legislation is not available in Thailand up to now.

Uncertainties and variability is a central characteristic of SESs due to their complexity, distinctive local features and their dynamics. In order to cope with these challenges and ensure the systems resilience, it is important to study the factors and interactions

that determine performances of these SESs. Especially, since “preserving well-functioning small scale SESs to manage ecological resources may be as important for the future as preserving biodiversity” (Janssen *et al.* 2007).

Therefore, this case study is examining the linkages inside SESs between socio-economic and socio-cultural household characteristics and the quality and utilization of natural resources, considering regional settings, such as classified PAs (inside/outside National Parks), and degree of self-governance (with and without CF). Further it aims to identify underlying causes for certain performances of small scale SESs. By this it attempts to initially fill the gap of studying local SESs systems from a more interdisciplinary approach (socio-economic and ecology) and guided by a sustainability framework of Ostrom, 2009 that allows for comparisons.

2 Objectives and outline

2.1 Research objective

This study intends examining and comparing the relationship between socio-economic conditions and natural resource utilization in four Karen villages in Chiang Mai Province by describing the role that forest governance and access to natural resources play for the well-being of the rural people and the protection of the environment. Qualitative as well as quantitative methods will be used to obtain the aim of the study. The following three objectives have been developed to be addressed in this research:

- Examining the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of households and the institutional setting of the four villages and the way they affect local livelihoods and the use of natural forest resources
- Identify the impact of restricted access to forests and self-governance (CF) on people’s well-being and the forests condition.
- Evaluate the performance of the investigated social-ecological systems represented by the selected villages and discuss the factors that caused this performance.