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Judith Knüpfer “Strategies of ethnic minorities in Northern Thailand in the conflict area between governmental reforestation measures and securing. A case study of two villages in the Chiang Rai Province, Thailand“

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Summary

The highland area of Northern Thailand is inhabited by different ethnic minorities, so-called hill tribes. They have cultivated mainly upland rice, maize and poppy in the mountains for decades. The Akha and Lisu are assigned to the “pioneer shifters“, whose traditional cultivation system is distinguished by a cyclical abandoning of fields and settlements. Population growth, forest damage and political pressure have more and more deprived the traditional pioneer shifters of sufficient land and primary forest, which are the basis of their cultivation system. Therefore fallow periods have become shorter and shorter during the last decade and the cultivation system is on its way of being transformed into permanent agriculture.

Nowadays land use in the highlands is decisively influenced by the forest protection policy of the Thai government. Almost all the highland area is declared state property and has been under the control of the Royal Forest Department (RFD) for a long time. In the research area the RFD has reforested farmland since the beginning of the nineties. The reforestation has led to an increasing legal uncertainty concerning farmland.

The objective of this study was to analyse the reactions of the farmers on land use insecurity and land shortage. These reactions are shown in certain modes of strategic behaviour. The development as well as the status quo of the socio-economic situation of the villages were taken into consideration, and problems and chances of securing income were discussed. Two villages in the highlands of Northern Thailand were selected for the study: the Lisu-village of Ban Thad and the Akha-village of Ban Pakasukjai, both in Chiang Rai province. The loss of land due to reforestation measures took a different course in these villages on account of the influence of different local organizations.

As part of the interdisciplinary study project “Social and Economic Dynamics of Rural Development in the Highland Areas of Northern Thailand” the survey was carried out during two field phases, a two-week team field research and a subsequent two-month individual research phase. Different methods of the empirical social research were used, the most

important of which were standardized and informal individual interviews and participating observation. In each village 30 households were interviewed. The thesis is a descriptive exploratory research study.

Since 1991 reforestation measures have been realized on a large scale in the village of Ban Thad by the RFD unit Mae Salong, in the course of which the farmers lost 90% of their farmland. Due to this heavy land loss many villagers had to take up off-farm labour to earn a living. Apart from their financial plight they are faced with many psychological and social problems on account of the radical changes of their way of living after the land loss.

In the Akha-village of Ban Pakasukjai the land loss was less dramatic. The Hill Area Development Foundation (HADF), a non-governmental Thai development organization, which works in Ban Pakasukjai, came to an agreement with the appropriate RFD-unit of Mae Chan. According to this agreement the villagers volunteered to realize reforestation by themselves. As a counteroffer the RFD refrained from direct intervention. Thus in contrast to Ban Thad Ban Pakasukjai was less affected by the drastic changes during the recent years. On the whole the villagers lost about 20% of their fields and agriculture is still the major income earner. But nevertheless the situation of almost all households interviewed has, from their own point of view, got worse. Shortage of land, declining yields and an insufficient supply with rice were important arguments for this assessment.

In Ban Thad as well as in Ban Pakasukjai there has been a considerable change in land use during the last 10 years. Traditionally both villages practised subsistence farming, the main crops being upland rice and maize. Whereas in Ban Pakasukjai almost all households still grow upland rice, the situation is different in Ban Thad, where in 1997 already 70% of the households that were interviewed had stopped growing upland rice. The permanent crops tea and fruit trees have become more important. Since the beginning of the nineties fruit trees have been planted on large areas. In both villages almost 90% of the households asked had already planted fruit trees when the interview was made. A further transformation of farmland into orchards is highly probable. In recent years paddy fields have been installed and cash crops like cabbage and ginger have been planted.

Increasing land shortage and land use insecurity have led to various changes in the behaviour of the households. Seven strategies to improve land use security were identified as well as various agricultural and non-agricultural strategies to secure income in spite of the increasing farmland shortage.

The reasons for land use insecurity are the absence of a legal basis for the cultivation of land and the forest protection policy of the RFD, which claims farmland for reforestation. The farmers have therefore taken measures to prevent land loss. Their strategies are based on the assumption that a certain agricultural behaviour is looked upon by the RFD as "sustainable". The farmers hope that the RFD will tolerate agriculture that sticks to this behaviour.

Because of the increasing land loss many village communities feel bound to protect themselves by the use of a "community strategy". In Ban Pakasukjai the villagers reforest cultivated areas under the supervision of the HADF. As they have until now lost far less land than their neighbours in Ban Thad, their community strategy can be called a success. This success depends however to a great degree on the diplomatic skills of the HADF and the good will of the RFD. Therefore the villagers still live in fear of further land loss. The transformation of the traditional cultivation systems to fruit plantation is typical for both villages today. In Ban Thad and Ban Pakasukjai fruit trees are planted mainly because the

farmers think that the RFD will not claim land with trees on it. The trees are meant as a claim for possession and to „appease“ the RFD by planting trees, though not forest trees. So the most important reason for this strategy is the hope to improve land use security. At the same time most farmers hope for a future contribution to their income earning. Other permanent crops, mainly tea, are meant to have the same effect. Tea is, however, less popular than fruit trees because for tea higher investment costs and careful tending are necessary. Paddy fields are also looked upon as „sustainable agriculture“ and supposed to protect farmland from the claims of the RFD. The farmers who cultivate rice paddies usually want to compensate declining yields of upland rice. But in addition they hope for a better land use security through the terraced fields.

The use of contour lines against erosion was observed almost only in Ban Pakasukjai. In the opinion of the farmers the hedges look „somewhat like forest“ and therefore they are also considered to protect land. Most of the farmers cannot see any agricultural advantage of this measure. But as they got the seedlings for free, many of them have planted hedges to satisfy the HADF workers, who propagate this measure, and at the same time improve their land use security. Most of the households take into account that fallows are inevitably claimed by the RFD and therefore with attention to the practice of permanent agriculture. Fences, too, indicate that the enclosed field is claimed and tended and so are put up to protect the fields and gardens from the RFD.

Today agriculture has a very different meaning for each household in the researched villages, as far as income securing is concerned. On the one hand the meaning depends on the access to and, on the other hand on the flexibility of a household in opening up new income sources through farming and off-farm labour. Households, which still depend on subsistence farming, usually have substantial problems to earn their living. Many farmers intensified their agriculture by the cultivation of paddy fields, which however could not guarantee the subsistence in the researched villages, not also by the production of high input cash crops like ginger and cabbage. There are also attempts to increase the number of pigs or fowl and thereby intensify and commercialize livestock. It remains to be seen whether the orchards, which have been much enlarged to improve land use security, will indeed secure income in the long term. In the near future there might arise problems during the unproductive period.

Different problems, which hinder agricultural development, were focussed on in this study. Insecure land rights have led to a situation, in which many fields are protected against land loss by fruit trees. They are therefore at the moment not available for any other kind of usage. In the villages of Ban Thad and Ban Pakasukjai one can also find the negative consequences of insecure land rights known from literature as for instance shortened planning periods as well as limited access to formal credit system (see also: Feder 1988). This is why insecure land rights can be seen as an obstacle to the intensification of agriculture. From the government's point of view, however, the allocation of land titles is in contrast to the national environmental policy, which still demands further reforestation. Land titles would allow transactions of land which might lead to undesirable sale of land to wealthy lowland Thais. A lot of households, however, still depend on agricultural income. So the government should take into consideration a guarantee of the status quo of access to land by allocating long term land use rights.

Both villages are in need of agricultural extension especially for newly adopted crops and appropriate marketing. However, because a lack of qualified extension workers was identified, there seems to be a call for action. Although the farmers in the researched villages have no access to the formal credit system because they have no land titles as a security, their

borrowing requirement seems to be fulfilled by the informal credit system. In the future an integration of the villages in the already existing credit programmes of the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) is conceivable.

Labour migration can be identified as the most important strategy of the villagers to compensate declining agricultural income. Nowadays the most substantial source of income in Ban Thad is the financial support by family members in migration. 77% of the researched households of this village have members work outside the village for a limited time. Many villagers work in the city of Bangkok but some seek labour in foreign countries. The most favoured foreign destination is Taiwan, where the income is far above the average income in Thailand. Although many villagers gained prosperity through labour migration, the separation puts a heavy strain on the families involved. In Ban Pakasukjai, too, labour migration is of increasing importance. But so far in this village it was restricted to the nearby city of Chiang Mai.

Beside solutions to agricultural problems, the access to Thai citizenship is of great substance. Members of the ethnic minorities are constrained in many decisions as long as they do not have a Thai identity card, because they have no freedom of action and get work permits that are limited in time. For social reasons the integration of ethnic minorities should be intensified. Because the Thai government is jointly responsible for many problems in the highlands brought on by land shortage and overpopulation. The allocation of the Thai citizenship could enhance a voluntary migration from the highlands or at least stop farming activities in ecologically sensible and therefore protected regions. For this reason a strengthening of the efforts for integration by a rapid allocation of ID-cards would be desirable.

Another bottleneck is the insufficient regional development. Job-creating measures for off-farm labour should be of top priority. To support tourism in Ban Pakasukjai seems to be a possibility. As Ban Thad is estimated to be less attractive for tourists, it is important for the villagers to establish industrial job opportunities as well as small and medium sized businesses. Education is indispensable for a rapid and successful development of the villages. The high value set upon school education by the villagers of Ban Thad is shown by their readiness to take out a loan for it. In Ban Pakasukjai, too, there is an increasing interest in school education, although the families mostly promote only single members of their household because of financial problems.

A massive extension of fruit plantations was directly and indirectly encouraged by the governmental forest policy. It seems necessary to review this policy, as there are studies that doubt that orchards can replace important forest functions. Whether the orchards will really contribute to the farmers income adequately, will be verified in some years at the earliest. There is a need to do research on promising fruits and on the demand and sale prospects of fresh and processed fruits, as there is hardly any experience in this field until now. The influence of orchards on the natural environment should be analyzed.

As agriculture only though important aspect of development in the research area, research work on the social and economic effects of labour migration would be desirable. The possibilities of a regional development are still to be analyzed. For example the already flourishing tourism as well as the building up of capacities to process the expected fruit yield could be of great interest.

The case study shows that the social and economic dynamics of the rural development in the highlands of Northern Thailand, set off by the reforestation policy of the government, have not yet come to an end. On the contrary, the development of the researched villages Ban Thad and Ban Pakasukjai, described in the case study, shows the uncertainty of its future.