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Institute of
Social Studies

**PEASANT MOVEMENT AND ORGANIZATION: A CASE OF ESARN SMALL
FARMERS' ASSEMBLY (ESFA) IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND**

A Research Paper presented by

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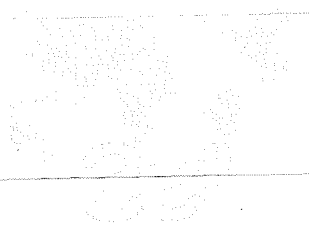
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Abbreviations and Glossary

BAAC	Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural and Cooperative
chao na	Farmers, Peasants,
chao rai	Upland farmers or peasants
esarn	Northeast
ESFA	Esarn Small Farmers Assembly
Khor Por Ror	In 1994, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives agreed to set up the "Kor Por Ror" program to help farmers to switch to more promising cash-crop growing or to some other alternatives. Through this program, farmers will be provided with agricultural loans with low interest rate and long grace period of loan repayment.
Khor Jor Kor	Land Redistribution Programme for the Poor living in Degraded Forest Reserves
NAC	National Agricultural Council
NACSF	National Agricultural Council for Small Farmers
NE/NGO-CORD	Northeast NGOs Coordinating Committee on Rural Development: one formal networks of NGOs which was set up by 61 organizations in 1985
NGOs	Non-Government Organizations or Non-Government Development Oriented Organizations
NSEDB	National Social Economic Development Board,
NSO	National Statistical Office
pa	Forest
phak	Region
PFT	Peasant Federation of Thailand established in 1974; other name is Farmers Federation of Thailand
rai	a measurement of area, 1 rai equal to 0.44 acre
Samasha	Assembly
sapha	Council
sor por kor 4-01	A kind of land ownership of Land Reform Project

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Northeastern Thai peasants have contributed significantly to the rapid growth of the contemporary Thai economy as they form the majority of agricultural producers and labourers. Their social and economic roles have laid the foundation of cultural and economic development in Thai society. Nonetheless, lives of these peasants are miserable. They work hard, but earn very little. They have been exploited and treated as a subordinated group in Thai society for generations and generations.

Peasants of the northeast have attempted to solve their socio-economic and political problems through various ways which can be observed in their daily lives. Their struggles are evident in "everyday forms of peasant resistance," and in their organized collective movements. Despite all these efforts, their plight as a result of poverty, indebtedness, and social injustice continues to grow.

The ways northeastern Thai peasants have tried to meet subsistence needs through, for example, gathering vegetables, hunting small animals and insects for own consumption, borrowing rice from other peasants who have rice surplus in that year and bartering some kinds of farm or forest products or handicraft products in exchange for rice, and becoming migrated labourers to work in town and in other progressive agricultural zones.

In the early 1990s, a series of peasant demonstrations, meetings, strikes, and protests of northeastern Thai peasants occurred successively. In my opinion, this is a new phenomenon showing a change of attitudes adopted by the Northeastern Thai peasants that is from being passive to active actors. Many Northeastern Thai peasants have been motivated to join in the movements which aim at protecting the peasants' rights and interests through a stronger bargaining power.

In addition, with the wider use of mass media, peasants have much easier access to information than before. With the influence of mass media as well as the emergence of networks among peasants in this region and throughout the country, the awareness of northeastern Thai peasants has been raised. In particular, the realization by the Northeastern Thai peasants that these problems are not isolated and limited only at their locality level but has strengthened

their resolve to work together and built a solidarity with other peasants in the country.

The contemporary movements of many different groups of northeastern Thai peasants show some new phenomena of peasant movements which might be different from those of the 1970s and 1980s. Presently, one of the most powerful peasant organizations in Thailand is the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA). The organization was established in 1992 with the joining together of many small-scale peasant organizations formed in the 1980s. The emergence of ESFA, as a peasant organization at the regional level, is unprecedented in the history of the northeast.

In order to understand this new phenomenon, I would like to analyze the ESFA as a representative case of peasant movements in the northeast. The aim of this study is to examine the efforts of northeastern Thai peasants in solving their socio-economic and political problems. The research seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) How has the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA) come about and as what kind of organization might it be regarded?
- (2) What are kinds of strategies that have been adopted by ESFA in order to try to solve problems and to protect its members' interests?
- (3) To what extent can ESFA be regarded as a successful peasant movement and, if so, in what sense?

1.2 Analytical Framework

Among social science theorists (e.g. Moore 1966, Wolf 1969, Migdal 1974, Paige 1975, and so on), Landsberger has presented a very clear systematic approach on the study for peasant movements and social changes. He views that "the beginning of a peasant movement not only in itself represents a change, but is the consequence of preceding changes..." (1974: 24).

This idea implies that a peasant movement is both the cause and the effect of a societal change. The conditions preceding the occurrence of peasant movements, according to Landsberger, can be categorized according to objective and subjective conditions.

The objective conditions refer to the societal changes in socio-economic

and political structures which affect peasants' situations negatively (Ibid., cf. Ratana 1986: 3). I find that the objective conditions have paved the ground necessary for the emergence of peasant movements in Thailand.

The long-term changes in the socio-economic and political structure of Thai society, which affect not only the northeast, but the entire Thai peasantry, lie in the change from a subsistence economy or pre-capitalist mode of production to a modern capitalist economy. Under the Thai feudal state, northeastern Thai peasants had a long experience of being unfree labours (slave or *thasa*, serf or *lek*, and commoner or *phrai*). The most fundamental change in this system occurred during the reign of King *Chulalongkorn* (1868-1910) when many major institutions were changed:

"Slavery was abolished. Government corvee labour was entirely replaced by hired labour. The status of *Phrai* (serfs) was deprived of much of its significance by the establishment of the regular army. The reorganization of the civil administration affected the basis of the organization..." (Akin 1969 as cited in Rosen 1975: 135).

This fundamental change has put the Thai state into a strong position to control its people socially, economically, and politically. It also placed the poor Thai people in the disadvantaged position. This change laid the ground for the emergence of various forms of peasant resistance to state power. However, considering the scale and frequency of such peasant movements, there were not many collectively-based movements of peasants in the northeast.

The subjective conditions, according to Landsberger, refer to "changes in aspirations, or in ideologies which at the least are necessary bridges between an objective change and an individual's reaction to it." (1974: 24) Following Landsberger's proposition, the emergence of peasant movements in the northeast of Thailand is not only the result of the preceding objective conditions, but also of the subjective conditions which refer to attitudinal changes of peasants in analysing how suffers and poverty in their lives have come about. Thus, the most likely stimulus for a peasant movement especially for our case - a northeastern Thai peasant movement - has to be considered by considering both the objective and the subjective conditions as suggested by Landsberger.

In addition, in Thai society, the relationships between peasants and state power has been crucial in providing conditions necessary for the emergence of peasant struggle movements. This is because "the Thai state plays a major role

in extracting 'economic surplus' from peasants and makes use of its ideological and coercive apparatuses to control its people" (Ratana 1986: 3) and legitimize its power. The controlling power of the Thai state has long been the most important force frustrating the emergence of collective peasant movements in Thai society.

Peasant-State Relationships

The relationship between Peasants and state is very crucial in examining the occurrence of peasant movements. This is because peasants are always under control of state power and other groups of power holders. As Clifford Geerze points out

"Politically, they [peasants] are subordinated in a hierarchical, relatively centralized state. This involve being subject to the demands and sanctions of power holders outside the peasant class, and paying some percentage of income to them." (as cited in Migdal 1974: 24)

By this view, peasants are treated as the subordinated class of society. The state and other power holders always get surplus appropriation from peasants agricultural products through various forms such as taxes, labours, farm price and market mechanism, etc.

State power, which Andrew Turton (1989b: 73) referred to as a ruling 'power bloc,' consists of the military as the dominant element, members of the ruling and governing classes, and the fractionalized bourgeoisie. The ruling 'power bloc' controls and operates the state apparatuses, and allies with the 'local power,' consisting of small numbers of peasants or local elites on the village, district, provincial, and regional level. Elements of this local power are from both classes and non-classes that are articulated with the ruling power bloc at the national level. According to Turton, the local powers are neither wholly state or private, or an apparatus; they are:

"one of the crucial means, direct and indirect, more or less consciously, and through a range of normative and remunerative sanctions backed by coercion, by which the state is able to prevent, divert, mitigate, and suppress the expression of conflict between rural classes and in a sense the very formation of those classes" (Ibid; 88).

In their counter-movements, northeastern Thai peasants need to find room for manoeuvre to withstand the state power. The Thai state, in general, is not

in support of peasant organizations and movements growing outside of its control and supervision as the growth of such social movements would defy and in the long-run undermine the state authority. Whenever peasants organize themselves to express their demands to the government, they are suspected of being insurgent instigators. However, as the plight of poor peasants worsen, reflecting the inability of the state to fulfil its role as a patron, the peasants response by organizing themselves into collective movements.

Although the objective and subjective conditions are necessary factors, the emergence of peasant movements needs to be considered by including several facilitating conditions. These conditions include organization, strategy, and alliance.

Relatively Autonomous Organization

According to Landsberger, "organization" is a kind of facilitating condition in peasant movements which can convert "feelings of discontent with status into collective behaviour.." (1974:45). The building up of a relatively autonomous organization representing peasants' interests then becomes another important condition for peasants in solving their immediate problems and to protect their long-term interests.

A relatively autonomous organization is an organization which represents the interests of its members and is not controlled by any others outside the organization. Fox and Gordillo view this type of organization as a "group capacity to make decisions about means and ends internally (i.e, without external intervention)." (1989: 131-132)

In Thailand, the groups holding socio-economic and political power do not tolerate the development of peasant organizations. However, to some extent, the government set up some peasant organizations like Agricultural Cooperatives and Farmer's Associations. Such organizations are generally loosely organized and powerless, and are not independent because they are government-established. They are controlled and supervised by government agencies. The boss-like attitude of many bureaucrats and the top-down planning nature of the bureaucratic system, constrain the state to generate real participation of the grassroots, or especially, to promote independent organizations.

Alliance of Northeastern Peasants

Peasants' allies are very crucial in assisting the emergence of a peasant movement. "If the peasantry does take the initiative of its movement but has no allies, it is generally unsuccessful." (Landsberger 1974: 62) In Thailand, peasants also need to form their alliances to support their struggles. In the past, they gained support from groups of intellectuals and university students, political parties, labour unions, and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Currently, peasants' struggles have received strong support from NGOs, local teacher groups, academic institutions and so on.

The role of NGOs in the northeast is very important for the emergence of peasant movements. Their role in mobilizing peasants to organize themselves to solve their economic hardships and to gain bargaining power have paved grounds to the establishment of various peasant organizations of northeastern Thai peasants.

Strategy

There are two patterns in development discourse reflecting major political-economic strategies, which I found to be applicable in the Thai peasantry. These two strategies are: The Withdrawal (Harmony Model) and Engagement Strategies (Conflict Model).

(1) Withdrawal Strategy

The Withdrawal Strategy refers to withdrawal from the capitalist economic production as economic and political power is in the hands of advantaged groups of people. Migdal characterizes this strategy, "withdrawal inward," as

"economically, peasants produced as many needs as possible themselves - from tools to food - without becoming dependent on outsiders. Subsistence agriculture was their primarily means of livelihood - they produced their own consumption needs, some surplus to trade for such items as kerosene or salt, and a large share for the rents and taxes to the lord or to the state." (1974 :16)

Northeastern Thai peasants who have adopted the withdrawal strategy in their struggles usually view that within the present social-economic system, it is less advantageous to participate fully in the capitalist economic production as it is already under control of capitalist entrepreneurs. There is no more

political space for the poor to gain by continued participation in the market economy. The resources are limited and the poor have less access and power to natural and economic resources when compared with the rich. Instead, the poor should realize and make use of their own capabilities and wisdom that have allowed them to survive and cope with the changing world for generations. Peasants should revive, bring back, and put those abilities and wisdom into practice. This concept of the "withdrawal inward" has become a popular development strategy among Thai NGOs since the early 1980s. One famous northeastern NGO worker points out that

"...All the activities that we have done are mainly for the benefit of others - to accept national economic objectives is to destroy the economy of the community...Villagers should shake away the bonds of dependence, the bonds of the market system, and return to self-reliance." (as cited in Chatthip 1991: 121)

(2) Engagement Strategy

The Engagement Strategy or "Outward-orientation" (Migdal 1974: 28) is based on engaging in and taking advantage of the capitalist economic production, instead of refusing it. The alternative development of this strategy has been to encourage participation in capitalist production, to try to empower people economically and politically into collective movements, and to build up people's own relatively autonomous organizations to defend their interests.

Huizer names this strategy a "conflict model" in his study about peasant movements in Southeast Asia. He views that the conflict model is one of the factors concerned with the question of how "class-in-itself," in Marxian terms, becomes "class-for-itself" (1980: 165-66). He points out that

"...peasant movements generally started only when there was a concrete event or acute conflict situation...It seems that even if conditions of peasants are bad or gradually worsening, peasants will get mobilized only when there is some kind of clear-cut conflict" (Ibid; 14).

Those who have adopted the engagement strategy recognize that peasants cannot be escaped from the influence of capitalist economic production and its control. Thus, it is better to accept the existence of the market economy and try to find a political space to gain gradually some kind of bargaining power, and to use that space for peasants' interests, especially those of the small

peasants. Although the capitalist production is predominantly controlled by the advantaged groups, the engagement strategy acknowledges the possibility for peasants to share political power, however limited. To this ends, peasants need to organize themselves to take some advantages from the system. As one of local intellectuals of the northeast says,

"the only way to enable the survival of peasants in a capitalist socio-economic system is to find ways for them to rely on their own which means that they use their own resources for capital investment, there are markets available for their farm products, and they can control their own production process." (Nalinee 1995: 20)

The selection of these two strategies may address the question of how to find alternatives in development of people and society at every level. Both strategies are found to be useful for analysing the peasant movement of northeastern peasant organizations in the 1990s.

Outcomes of the movement

An analysis of the outcomes of the peasant movement under the leadership of the ESFA will focus on the consequences of its actions in terms of the material changes resulting from the responses to its demands by the government, and the development of peasant's awareness after their participation in the measures ESFA has taken.

In sum, my analysis of this study will be based on those concepts and theories described above.

1.3 Hypotheses

The main hypothesis of this study is that the movement of ESFA is different from which occurred in the 1970s and 1980s because of its scale, frequency, and influence. A sub-hypothesis is that kind of peasant movement will never stop and will continue to grow as long as the plight of northeastern Thai peasants has not yet been solved.

1.4 Scope and Limitations of the Study

In this research paper, I chose to study about peasants in the Northeast instead of the other regions or the whole country because this region is the poorest region. Moreover, there have been many recent collective movements of

Northeastern Thai peasants against the state power to demand their plights. I concentrate my study on the struggle movements between Northeastern Thai peasants and state power with less attention given to the social differentiation within peasant classes and in terms of their sex, age, and social status in Thai society. The decision to limit the study scope takes into consideration of time constraints. The period of the study is from the 1980s to 1990s.

1.5 Methodology

This research relies primarily on data gathered from interviews and participatory observations which I conducted during the period from 1981 to 1993. During that time I was working with NGOs whose primary aim was the support of peasant organizations in the northeast. Through all this working experience, I had good opportunities to interview peasant leaders and members of ESFA in detail and to make participatory observations on ESFA activities. The more recent information used in this study were obtained from interviews with two ESFA leaders conducted by Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya on August 23, 1995.

In addition, the study makes use of secondary data obtained from the library of the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Hague. I also rely on some course-reading materials and lectures from the Agricultural and Rural Development Programme (ARD) at the ISS. The data derived from these secondary sources include the socio-economic profiles of the Northeastern region in general. Data derived from current newspaper clippings, Thai and English journals and NGOs' Reports concerning roles, activities and problems of peasant movements in the Northeast have also been referred to.

1.6 The Organization of the Paper

There are 6 chapters in this research paper.

The first chapter is the introductory part, providing statement of the problem and the research questions, analytical framework and the methodology used in this research paper.

The second chapter deals with the socio-economic situations of the northeast including the theoretical consideration of peasants in the northeast, its inhabitants, and main characteristics.

The third chapter describes the role of state power in controlling its people and the role of NGOs in supporting peasant movements in the northeast.

The fourth chapter reviews the history of peasant movements in the northeast and presents the case of ESFA which comprises the birth and evolution of ESFA, and the analysis of ESFA's organizational structure.

The fifth chapter describes ESFA's collective movements in demanding the government to solve their urgent problems.

The last chapter is the analysis and conclusion of ESFA's movement.

Chapter 2

THE NORTHEAST: ITS INHABITANTS AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

2.1 Peasants of the Northeast

The terms "peasant" and "farmer" are largely defined by many social science theorists such as Wolf 1966, Alavi 1987, and so on. My point of departure is that the terms "peasant" or "farmer" used in this paper are based on the work of Eric Wolf. He distinguishes "a peasant" from "a farmer" by pointing out that

"The major aim of peasant is subsistence....He thus cleaves traditional arrangements which guarantee his access to land and to the labour of kin and neighbours...In contrast, farmer enters the market fully, subjects his land and labour to open competition, explores alternative uses for the factors of production in the search for maximal returns, and favours the more profitable product over the one entailing the smaller risk." (1969: xiv-xv)

Actually, Wolf does not elaborate on the third group of peasants or farmers who are not fully involved with the "subsistence" mode of production. They have entered market production, but still produce partly for their own consumption. When speaking of northeastern Thai peasants, it is more complicated to differentiate between peasants and farmers. On the one hand, these rural producers are small, land holding peasant family farms. They produce mainly for home consumption with the use of family labour and simple farm tools. On the other hand, they are farmers because they also produce some surplus for the market at which time they might become fully engaged in market production.

In this research paper, I will use these two terms "peasants" and "farmers" interchangeably as I think it is suitable for the Thai context in which no distinction is made between peasants and farmers at all. In Thai, one addresses peasant and farmer as "*chao na*" or "*chao na chao rai*" which refers to rural agricultural cultivators who mainly depend on family labour. This labour is used for both subsistence and cash crop production. Hired labour is also acquired when a shortage of family labour is experienced. Also household members may be, for shorter or longer periods, working on other farms or even on large farm enterprises.

Generally, peasants are not at all an ideally homogenous class. On the issue of class differentiation among peasants in each society, Lenin views that

"within the peasantry...there was already a noticeable process of class differentiation. Clear inequalities between households were emerging in the distribution of land, horses, and other means of production. As a result, households with insufficient means to produce their own subsistence were being proletarianized, while those with surplus means were increasingly employing waged labourers."

(as cited in Cox 1986: 27)

In the northeast, peasants might be broadly differentiated into three socio-economic categories. Central criteria for categorizing are: the size of land ownership, income or property, and finally the social relations of production in which, "peasants participate are, in fact, defined by the manner in which the surplus labour of direct producers is appropriated by a non-producing class" (Deere and de Janvry 1979: 607). These three categories include the **wealthier peasants** (representing less than 10 percent per village) who own an average of around 50 rai (1 rai equivalent to 0.4 acre) of land, the **small peasants** (the majority, about 60 percent) who own an average of around 20 rai, and **marginal peasants** (around 10 percent) who own less than 10 rai. The landless peasants which constitute less than 10 percent are also included in the group of marginal peasants.¹ Members of this last category generally become tenants, sharecroppers, and/or wage-labourers, and most of them are migrant labourers. Capitalist farmers and landlords are very rare in most northeastern villages. Merchants, usuries, and absentee landlords do exist, but most of them are in the district and provincial townships.

To summarize, the term peasant in reference to the northeast in this paper applies to small farmers who own an average size of farmland around 20 rai. It is important to indicate here that for those small peasants who do not own enough land to be independent peasants,² their situation is not much different from

¹ An example of typical Northeast situation from a survey conducted in 1991 among 103 rice farmers in Roi Ed, 5 families (4.8%) owned no land, 55 families (53.3%) owned less than 15 rai, 25 families (24.2%) owned land between 16-30 rai, 15 families (14.5%) owned 31-50 rai, 2 families owned land between 51-100 rai; only one owned more than 100 rai. the average size of land ownership is 18.8 rai (Phelinas 1993: 66).

² To be 'independent', a peasant should own at least 50 rai of land.

marginal peasants or landless villagers. The only difference is that these small peasants are able to produce to meet their own consumption needs at least partly.

2.2 General Information of the Northeast

Compared with the other regions, the northeast is the largest region of Thailand. Its area is around 168,850 sq km or 105.5 million rai which comprises one-third of the total land area of the country (NESDB 1995). The population in the northeast, which is around 20 million, is also one-third of the entire country's population. Most northeastern people are of ethnic Laotian heritage. There are, as well, other ethnic groups such as the *Khmer*, *Suai*, and *Tai Deng* (*Khorat* group) who is said to be a mixture of *Siamese* and *Khmer* (Fukui 1993: 34). Politically, the northeasterners are descendants of Laotian ancestors who have been under some kind of control by the Siamese kingdom since the mid-18th century.

The northeast is a basin-like plateau, known as the *Khorat* Plateau, characterized by a rolling terrain which stands at an average of between 100-200 meters above sea level (Lovelace et al 1988: 10). The soil of the *Khorat* Plateau is notoriously poor, sandy, and drought-prone (Fukui 1993: 25). The area of saline soil is around 17.8 million rai or 32 percent of the total agricultural land area (NESDB 1995). There are three main rivers which flow eastward into the Mekhong river. According to Lovelace, about 20 percent of the northeast is suitable for irrigation or has potential for large-scale water resource development (1988: 10). As of 1992, the irrigated area in this region was around 6.5 million rai (NESDB 1995) which is only 11.6 percent of the total agricultural land area in the northeast.

2.3 Main Characteristics of the Northeast

The following lists are the main characteristics of the socio-economic environments of the northeast:

2.3.1 The Land of the Poor

The northeast is known as the poorest region of Thailand with regard to the income of its people and the productivity of its soil (Medhi et al 1983: 1). In 1992, the monthly income per household in the northeast was 3,101 baht (US \$ 124) while the monthly income per household of people in Bangkok was 15,729 baht, and

for the whole country was 6,957 baht (NSO 1994: 99).

The majority of Thai peasants, especially northeastern Thai peasants, are very much affected by economic problems which have been increasing all the time. A study by the World Bank shows that the incidence of poverty in the northeast - that is the percentage of population having income so low that it places them below the established poverty line, was about 48 percent in 1975/76, and this number increased to 67 percent in 1979/80 (as cited in Medhi et al 1983:1, 6). The number of poor persons in the northeast further increased from around 5.6 million in 1981 to 8.0 million in 1986 while the corresponding figures of the whole country were around 9.8 and 13.6 million respectively (NESDB as cited in Kosit & Lamduan 1991: 155).

Despite the fact that most northeastern people are very poor, its labour surplus is significant for the economic growth of the country. The total number of labourers in this region in 1993 was 11,672,100 (NSO 1993), which is around 36.5 percent of the labour force for the whole country. The northeast labour force has contributed to the growth of the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors within the region and other parts of the country.

2.3.2 Patterns of Land Ownership

Most peasants in the northeast own their own land. A surplus appropriation among peasants in a northeastern village is a rare social phenomenon. This is very different from the situation in other regions like the north and the central plains.

Compared to other regions, the northeast has the lowest tenancy rate -less than 10 percent- while the tenancy rate for the whole country is 20 percent or more³ (Turton 1989a: 59). Since there are about 2.5 million farm households holding 55.7 million rai of agricultural land area in the northeast (NSO 1994: 23), the average area of land holding per household is 22.3 rai or 3.5 hectares.

Although the problem of land ownership in the northeast is not so severe as in the central and the northern regions, there is the problem of incomplete legal rights over farmlands. According to Turton, smaller farmers are likely to have

³ Tenants and Part-Tenants in the Central is 41.3 percent, in the North and the south is 26.71 and 17.68 percent respectively (Thailand 1976 as cited by Turton 1989a: 60).

less legal security on land owned and likely to have less access to irrigation, cheap credit, and inputs, and thus they are typically restricted to single-cropping with lower yields (1989a: 58).

2.3.3 The Conflict of Land-Forest

The decrease of forest area in this region brings another problem over land rights and land use. When the Thai government started to implement its first Five-Year National Social and Economic Development Plan in 1961, the forest area in the northeast was 44.3 million rai which constituted 42 percent of the total area of the region (Chermsak 1992: 172). In 1991, the remaining forest area was only 13.6 million rai or 13 percent of the total area (NESDB 1995).

The crisis of deforestation in the northeast has led to a scarcity of land available for further farming-area expansion and has produced conflicts over natural resource utilization among various concerned groups. The Thai-style land reform program which started in 1976 was aimed merely at re-distributing the degraded forest land in the National Forest Reserves which "have long been occupied by villagers who have been living there for a long time (up to 80 or 100 years) even before the forest boundaries were made" (Phasuk 1994: 35). In Thailand, as Phasuk points out, there are about 7.2 million people occupying areas designated as forest reserve land (1994: 35). In the northeast, 3.2 million people in 5,137 villages are occupying areas designated as forest reserve land (NE/NGO-CORD 1991: 94). This problem has become a very serious problem of land ownership rights and has led to conflicts of land rights and resource use between northeastern peasants and the state in alliance with corporate conglomerates and capitalist entrepreneurs.

2.3.4 Patterns of Agricultural Production

Despite its droughts and poor soil, the northeast is an important agricultural region. Apart from rice, other crops, such as sugar cane, kenaf, maize, and cassava are also main agricultural products of the region. In 1993, the area of agricultural land of the northeast was 55,756,024 rai which is 45.2 percent of the agricultural land of the whole country (NSO 1994: 23). According to the Gross Regional Product (GRP) of the northeast, the agricultural sector produced about 81.7 million baht annually, which was 25 percent of the GRP of the northeast in 1992 (NESDB: 1995) and about 24.5 percent of the agricultural sector

of Gross National Product (GNP) in the same year (NSO 1994: 91).

The major crops in the northeast can be categorized into rice and upland cash crop sectors. Northeastern Thai peasants grow rice for their own consumption and for sale. Upland cash crops, including sugar cane, maize, kenaf, cassava, are their main income.

(1) The Rice Sector

Rice is the most significant food and cash crop of the northeast. The area of rice cultivation in the crop year 1992/93 was 38,732,136 rai which comprises about 69.4 percent of the agricultural area in this region (NSO 1994: 24). Though the productivity of the paddy yield in this region is very low at about 1.2 metric tons per hectare on average (Fukui 1993: 20), the amount of rice production from the northeast is the highest in the country. In the crop year 1992/93, the rice production of the whole kingdom was 19,917 metric tons of which 8,277 metric tons or 41.5 per cent are from the northeast (NSO 1994: 21). However, northeastern Thai peasants who grow rice are still very poor as a result of low rice prices. The government agricultural policies, especially the rice price policy, are not in favour of supporting the Thai farmers. Theodore Panayotou summarizes the four principle elements of the rice policy as:

"the regulation of rice exports; the maintenance of a supply of low-priced rice for domestic consumption; the maintenance of government revenue from rice export taxes; and at the sametime the maintenance or increase of farm-gate paddy prices. paddy farmers are squeezed, on the one hand, by the control of rice export prices which determines a low domestic price, and the export tax on rice...On the other hand, farmers are disadvantaged by industrial and trade policies which tax agriculture by increasing the price of production inputs and consumer goods." (cited by Turton 1989a: 62)

As a result of the urban-biased development policies of the Thai government, northeastern Thai peasants are not able to make ends meet through solely farming production. After the rice harvest season, most of them have to migrate out to search for jobs in urban areas, in more advanced agricultural zones, and in other countries like those in the Middle East, Taiwan, Singapore, and so on.

(2) Upland Cash Crop Sector

Cash crops such as cassava, maize, and sugar cane are main agricultural products of the northeast. In the northeast, the cash crop area covered around 1.7 million rai in the crop year 1961-62 and had increased to 10.4 million rai by 1988-89 (Thai Agricultural Statistics as cited in Jermsak 1992: 186). These statistics show that the cash crop areas in the northeast increased by about 8.7 million rai within 27 years.

Generally, the prices for cassava and maize are very low. Sugar cane seems to be the only protected reasonable price and the productivity is higher than other cash crops. These crops are also the main agricultural products for export. In 1993, Thailand's export value of cassava and maize (which are mainly produced in the northeast) and sugar cane was around 32.4 million baht compared to 32.9 million baht for rice export in the same year (NSO 1994: 75). Despite the high value of the export of these cash crops, most northeastern Thai peasants do not benefit much from selling their cash-crop products.

As an example, I will illustrate a case of tapioca export to the European Communities (EC). In cassava production, a farmer has to invest about 400 baht or US \$16 (fertilizers, labour cost, petrol, and renting a ploughing truck) for growing one rai of cassava. If he has enough family labourers, he does not need to hire outside labourers to help harvest cassava roots. He will also have to rent a small truck to transport the cassava roots to the nearby chipping yard for sale. When the heavily-loaded truck rides into the chipping yard, the farmer has to pay a bribe to a policeman because the truck is overweight. The chipping yard will also dock twelve percent of the weight because of the "sand loss." The farm-gate price for fresh cassava roots, in the crop year 1991/1992 for example, was as low as 0.80 baht per kg (US\$ 0.03). This means that the farmers' income from selling cassava is less than 800 baht per rai (the average yield of cassava is 1,000 kg per rai). The price for pellets in the EC market was 3.60 baht per kg (2.4 kg of fresh cassava roots can produce one kg of pellets).

In the same year, the tapioca export for the EC market alone was 7.5 million tons which earned about 27,000 million baht. Of this amount, the cassava grower gets only 6,000 million baht or 22 percent of the total value. The surplus of the export values of 21,000 million baht or 77 percent stays in the hands of the builders of warehouses, the export companies, the Thai shipping companies, and other concerned foreign companies (NIO 1990: 64).

The substitution of cassava plantation policy of the Thai government under the financial support of EC⁴ since the early 1980s led to the cultivation of alternative crops such as sugar cane, cashew nuts, millet, rubber, eucalyptus trees, and so on. The promotion of cashew nuts and eucalyptus plantations are other clear examples of how the agricultural development policies of the Thai government are in favour of industries and agribusiness companies. Environmental destruction and conflicts between peasants and the state over the use and control of natural resources, are the serious consequences of these policies.

2.3.5 The Expansion of Agribusiness Companies

Agribusiness in Thailand has developed further than any other countries in Southeast Asia and the industry is heavily dominated by large corporate enterprises such as *Charoen Phokaphan (C.P.)* (Hirsch 1994: 322).

In Thailand, agribusiness companies, with investments by indigenous capital and transnational conglomerates have been encouraged by the Investment Promotion Act of 1972 which "allows inter alia for landownership by foreign firms, transfer of profits, and tax exemptions." (Phasuk 1980 cited in Turton 1989a: 63) The expansion of agribusiness companies have had a lot of impact on northeastern peasants, especially in placing their subsistence production under the monopolistic control of these companies. Contract farming, a growing practice by the agribusiness groups, "effectively gives corporate capital much more direct control over agricultural labour, even when farming continues to be based on a pattern of small-holder production." (Hirsch 1994: 322)

The following are examples of the most significant roles agribusiness groups have had in relation to northeastern Thai peasants:

(1) Eucalyptus Plantations

In the northeast, the government's reforestation programme has been part of the larger problem of "resource conflicts" which has placed "the state and

⁴ Allocation of the 70 million ECUs (approximately 100 million US dollars) in aid stipulated in the first tapioca agreement (1982-1986) by the Thai government and the EC. Criticism from various sources were that a lot of money had disappeared in the Thai Bureaucracy. About 65 percent of this allocation flowed back to the EC in the form of fertilizer purchases in France. In turn, the BAAC sold this fertilizer on credit to Thai farmers who used it to increase rice. (NIO 1990: 72).

corporate sector against the popular sector." (Suthy 1995: 108)

These conflicts started after the government proposed the National Forest Policy of Thailand in 1985. This policy has divided Thailand's forests into two types: forests for conservation and forests for commercial production (Pinkaw & Rajesh 1992: 23). Since then, the government started to support the business sector to grow fast-growing trees, especially eucalyptus in degraded forest areas on the one hand, and then evicted villagers from reserved forests, on the other. This kind of reforestation policy has led to the confrontations between villagers and the agribusiness groups who are strongly supported by state authorities. According to Lohmann, the eucalyptus plantations offer opportunities to make huge profits to big business companies (1990: 23). In fact, the eucalyptus promotion in reforestation policy of the government has been backed up by various network of multinationals, United Nations' organizations, and bilateral agencies (Ibid;). Since 1985, with the support from NGOs, students, academics and the media, northeastern peasants have organized their collective movements against the eucalyptus plantation projects (Pinkaw & Rajesh 1992: 72-73).

(2) Cashew Nuts

The promotion of cashew nut plantations, as a new hope for farmers suffering from the falling price of tapioca, is one serious problems of the government's four-partite agricultural projects linking state authorities, farmers, private investors, and the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). The project started in 1986 when northeastern peasants were convinced by government officials to draw a loan from the BAAC and buy cashew-nut seedlings and chemical fertilizers from the Sirichai-Maboongkrong Cashew Nut Company with the promise that the company would send its technicians to provide technical supports to the farmers and buy the qualified products at a guaranteed price.

The project turned out to be a disaster for the peasants as the productivity of cashew nuts proved to be as low as 7 kilograms per rai which was far below the estimated yields of 225 kilograms per rai (Sanan 1993: 8). The productivity is very low because most of the seedlings sold by the Sirichai-Maboongkrong Cashew Nut Company are unproductive. It took not less than 5 years for cashew nut farmers to learn that they were cheated by the company under the support of the BAAC and some government agencies.

2.4 Conclusion

The northeast is known as the poorest region of Thailand. Despite the physical hardships, its agricultural production contributes to national economic growth such as producing rice and other cash crops for the country's major export income earnings.

From the first Five-Year National Economic Development Plan in 1961 up to the seventh Social and Economic Plan at present, Thailand's successive policies "have neglected or discriminated against the agricultural sector and favoured urban and industrial development, the accumulation of capital outside the rural sector, and the integration of the Thai economy into the world economic system" (Turton 1989a: 61). Northeastern Thai peasants have not enjoyed the benefits of the government's agricultural policies, instead most of them have been adversely affected by the monopolistic control of agribusiness companies, getting poorer, and experiencing growing indebtedness and dependence (Ibid; 63).

Moreover, along the process of the rapid economic growth in Thailand, the dispossession of farmlands in the region has become a more serious problem than before due to the high value of land prices and the scarcity of land available for further farming-area expansion. There is the new phenomenon of land estates of comparable size being purchased by agribusiness companies and other new urban-based land owners (Turton 1989a: 58). This trend leads to an increase of farmland dispossession and many small farms in the northeast are being disappeared.

Since the mid-1980s, northeastern Thai peasants began their collective protests against the government and agribusiness companies on various issues which affected their livelihood and land properties. It is possible to view that the occurrence of peasant movements in this region has resulted from the objective conditions of the socio-economic changes which affected most northeastern Thai peasants. Up until now, most northeastern Thai peasants have been pushed into the worsening socio-economic conditions. They are on the brink of being bankrupted, falling further into debt, losing their land, and migrating to work elsewhere in both agricultural and industrialize sectors. The imbalance economic policy which was export-oriented and based on exploitation of natural and human resources in rural areas to feed industries and urban areas has led to the emergence of various forms of peasant struggle movements in this region.

Chapter 3

THE NORTHEAST: THE ROLE OF STATE POWER AND NGOS

The emergence of peasant movements have to take into account the consideration of subjective conditions (Landsberger 1974). This chapter, I will describe the influence of political and cultural environments of the northeast to show how the Thai state used its ideological hegemony to control the people. The role of NGOs in supporting peasant movements in the northeast will be presented in the second part.

3.1 The Role of State Power in Controlling its People

The northeast region has been perfectly assimilated into a regional part of Thailand through the administrative reform of the Thai Central Government by the end of 19th century (Fukui 1993: 35). Though there were some rebellions or resistances against the centrality of the Bangkok Government occurring mostly during the first half of the 20th century, it is hardly to find the serious conflict of ethnic problem as such, at present (Ibid; 35). This implies that the Bangkok Government achieved in establishing national unification by removing the ethnic differences into regionalism instead (ibid; 35).

The political system of modern Thailand since the rise of a nation-state in late 19th century and after the revolution in 1932 which changed from Absolute Monarchy to Constitutional Monarchy, is still highly centralized. According to Chai-anan, the Thai government controls its citizen through its bureaucracy which

"had been patterned after the Weberian ideal type which was, in principle, legal-rational, non-ethnic and was supposed to be equally accessible to every group in society irrespective of race or socio-political status." (1993: 64)

The process of centrality started by determining everything from the centre and forcing it to the citizen. Social and economic planning, budget planning and controlling, national security controlling, all these are determined by the central government and bring down to force people to accept and follow them. In order to understand the role of state power in controlling its people, I agree with Andrew Turton (1984, 1989b) that we have to consider the 'ruling power block' and the 'local power' and its interrelations.

State power, which Andrew Turton (1989b: 73) referred to as a ruling 'power bloc,' consists of the military as the dominant element, members of the ruling and governing classes, and the fractionalized bourgeoisie. The ruling 'power bloc' controls and operates the state apparatuses, and allies with the 'local power,' consisting of small numbers of peasants or local elites on the village, district, provincial, and regional level. Elements of this local power are from both classes and non-classes that are articulated with the ruling power bloc at the national level. According to Turton, the local powers are neither wholly state or private, or an apparatus; they are:

"one of the crucial means, direct and indirect, more or less consciously, and through a range of normative and remunerative sanctions backed by coercion, by which the state is able to prevent, divert, mitigate, and suppress the expression of conflict between rural classes and in a sense the very formation of those classes."

(Ibid; 88)

According to Althussers, the state use both the repressive (for example military, police, paramilitary, legal) and 'ideological' (for example legal again, educational, religious, media, political cultural, familial) 'state apparatuses' (as cited by Turton 1984: 38). In Thailand, both ruling power block and local power exercise its power through both formal or legal institutions (e.g. various government agencies and local administrative units) and informal or socio-cultural groups (e.g. various groups like 'village scouts' and 'Krating Daeng' during the anti-communist period in the 1970s and various foundations and societies).

As to integrate various different ethnic groups in different parts of the country to be under the control of the centrality successfully, the Thai state needs to gain hegemony over its people. In so doing, the state cannot rely solely on the use of its coercive apparatus because without acceptance from its people, the state power will not last long. It is necessary to create an ideological system that is able to gain public support and acceptance of the state power willingly. Thus, the use of the ideological mechanisms to mold its people to accept the state power is unavoidable.

In the following, I will explain the ways that the Thai state use in order to shape and mold its people's thoughts:

(1) the utilization of the schooling system to inculcate a sense of nationalism and being Thainess among Thai people. Central Thai language is used as a national language and acquired by children as a first language which is "an important component in the type of mentality under construction." (Diller 1993: 89) At school, children learn to be a part of Thai society. They are told to be unified by and loyal to the three pillars of Thai society: the Nation, the Buddhist religion, and the Monarchy. According to *Sulak Sivaraksa*, this concept of three pillars was initiated by King Rama VI by linking with the British trinity of Empire, God, King, and Country (1993: 44).

(2) the use of family institution to socialize children (*phu noi*) to be considerate and submissive to elders (*phu yai*). Children should not argue with elders, but listen and follow as the elders were born before. So, they have more life experiences and know more than the young ones. There is one old Thai-saying referring to this belief: "*Dern Tam Phu Yai Ma Mai Kad*" or "if you walk after the elders, dogs will not bite you" which implies that you are always safe if you obey your patrons.

(3) the use of some elements of Buddhist beliefs such as, "the law of karma," referring to whatever (reward and punishment) one receives in this present life, is in accordance with one's own action in the past. Thus, to explain why a person was born poor in his present life, the answer can be that "poverty is a result of one's own action in one's past life," which implies that poverty, for example, is not caused by economic surplus appropriation of the rich to the poor.

(4) the use of some cultural characteristics of the traditional way of communal living (primitive society) which emphasize mutual cooperation and harmony among villagers as "brotherhoods and sisterhoods." All these implies that there is no class conflict at all in contemporary rural Thai society.

(5) the use of *sakdina* (feudal) ideology in regard to "patron and client relationship" to legitimize the existence of superior and inferior relationship of people in Thai society. In this patronage relationship, mutual reciprocity of people from different classes rather than class exploitation is recognized.

(6) the use of *Thasa* (slavery) thinking, emphasizing that the rulers no matter, whom they are and where they are from, they are always absolutely right. I consider this thinking as the slavery thinking because the slaves, according to *Jit Poumisak*, "were wholly the property of the slave master...The slave's

like the plow, the harrow, and the domestic animal." (Reynolds 1987: 61) This idea is a link with what a Thai child has been taught and how it is socialized in his/her family. As they are "*phu noi*" there should not be any disagreement, protest, unrest, or resistance against "*phu yai*" at all.

(7) the use of the modern-style of highly developed industrial societies: "the mafia" which means that failure to use ideological mechanisms mentioned above to control the people, then it is necessary to "get rid of them" through any repressive means, as these people are a threat to "national security". This Mafia-type power or "*chaopor*", according to Feer (1991), "has recently found its best ally in the democratic process where local influences and money are of vital support for party candidates (as cited by Chai-anan 1993: 77).

In sum, the Thai state do not rely only on the use of its coercive apparatus but also create an ideological system including the educational system, the family institution, and Buddhism in order to inculcate, shape and mold ideas, beliefs, social values, and norms of its people. Mass media helps diffuse knowledge, ideas, and values to public at large. However, if all these ideological state-mechanisms fail to inculcate its people, then the Thai state would use repressive measures to control its people.

In addition, Thai people also internalized those hegemonic ideology through the process of socialization to the extent that "it becomes 'common sense' for the mass, part of their normal way of life, culture and consciousness" (Mouffe 1979 as cited by Ratana 1986: 5-6) The influence of state coercive and ideological apparatuses is very crucial in controlling Thai peasants to be placed on the disadvantaged position in the society. However, peasants can rise up or join collective struggle movements if their losing interests are perceived by them. In this point, northeastern Thai peasants must be aware of the relationship between the fact that they are getting poorer or suffering from the changes and that the socio-economical development policies as well as the state power holders are part of their problems. Both objective (socio-economic changes as described in chapter 2) and subjective (changes in the peasants' political consciousness) conditions as suggested by Landsberger are the necessary conditions for the occurrence of peasant movements.

3.2 The Role of NGOs in Supporting Northeastern Thai Peasant Organizations

Although the established dominant (hegemonic) ideology is very powerful, it not fixed and static. It is in a constant terrain of meaning contestation among different groups in society to gain bargaining power for one's own interests and rights. That is the reason for the growth of civil society such as NGOs, peasant movements, workers' unions, teachers' unions, union of mass media, human rights movements, and so on, emerges in Thai society to point out the irrationality of state power.

In Thailand, the term NGOs¹ was first used among intellectual activists in the late 1970s. During that period, NGOs were groups of social activists which were different from those private business groups, philanthropic organizations, and government-established organizations.

Since the mid-1980s, the discourse of NGOs has been changed to the context that every type of groups out of governmental organizations (and political parties), either progressive or conservative groups, is called 'NGOs.' In 1985, the government, by the office of National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) agreed to support the establishment of those progressive NGOs. The NGO-CORD or National NGO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development² was set up by around 170 NGOs from every region of Thailand.

Many Thai NGOs view that the government may not be receptive to the needs of the disadvantaged groups in the society, and in fact may worsen the situation. Therefore, NGOs emerge to address this lack. They share the same idea on the role of the state in each society that "many states have not been accountable to society, and indeed have been more interested in controlling and moulding society to suit their own interests, than in responding to the needs of that society." (Farrington et al 1993: 5)

¹ In this study, the meaning of NGOs refer to non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) or groups of people who work in social development fields including community development, human rights, and social welfare. NGOs here refer to those groups of progressive NGOs which are members of NGO-CORD.

² This name was changed into "NGO Coordinating Committee on Development" in 1994.

In the Northeast, NGOs began its prominent role in supporting grassroots movements or peasant organizations in early 1980s³. Many NGO development workers were the former activists from student and intellectual movements of 1970s. They join NGO's circle to work with peasants as residential community development workers in villages. These workers become catalysts in help organizing peasants or villagers at community level which pave grounds for the emergence of peasant organizations and movements. The role of NGOs during this period is theoretically considered as the movements which are characterized by the concerned to demand rights in civil society. This kind of movements in the 1980s-1990s are less revolutionary than the analyses of the 1960s and 1970s, as Farrington points out, "they stress the need to make the state more transparent, open to public scrutiny and more responsive to societal concerns." (Ibid; 11)

The concept of development work of NGOs, during this period, was very much focused on self-reliance and people's participation of villagers. The success of organizing villagers into groups to serve their needs through working together between the NGO workers as "the outsiders" and villagers as "the real actors" has enhanced the roles of villagers to become more active in participating and organizing their own relatively autonomous organizations to represent their rights and benefits. Since the mid-1980s, various kinds of villagers' organizations and their networks have been promoted and become the mainstream of grassroots development in this region.

By the beginning of 1980s, there are two different development approaches which become the major discourse of development among NGOs in the Northeast. One of them is the "community culture approach," which was the most popular among NGOs in the northeast, especially during the beginning of the 1980s. The origin of this approach, with regard to internal factors is "a consequence of the perceived threat of capitalism towards village communities, of a fear that communities are disintegrating while community culture remain strong.." (Chatthip 1991: 126). This approach then develop to be the basis of "the Harmony Model" (cf. Huizer 1980) or "the Withdrawal Inward Model" (cf. Migdal 1974).

³ The North-East Thailand Project (Net Project) in Surin Province, Northeast Community Development project (Redd Barna or Save the Children-Norway) and Foster Parents Plan International in Khon Kaen Province were those pioneers among NGOs in the region.

The other development alternative, which came out earlier than the community culture approach, is the "community organization (CO)" or "people's organization (PO)" approach. It is integrated with the idea to promote human rights. The CO approach emphasizes the rights, dignity, and interests of peasants as the community culture approach does, but in different method and manner. The most prominent feature of the CO approach is to empower peasants through organizing themselves to confront the oppressor. According to Maglaya, "power is the means by which the people can find redress for their grievances and act against those conditions that oppress and dehumanize them" (1978: 5). This approach can be seen as "the Conflict Model" (cf. Huizer 1980) by which the emergence of the ESFA has been very much influenced.

The role of northeastern NGOs in supporting peasant struggle movements can be divided into 3 steps which are:

(1) The step of "Sang Lak Pak Than" or "Building Up Strong Community Bases at Village or Sub-district Level" (1980-1985)

From my research it appeared that villagers might strengthen their powers within their government-established groups such as, Village Committee, Tambon (Subdistrict) Council, Farmers' Association. They also might establish their own organizations parallel to the government-established groups such as, Rice Bank, Cattle Raising Group, Saving Group or other various forms of villagers' organizations. These kinds of organizations have been largely promoted by various NGOs in the northeast. Organizing villagers' organizations is the initial step towards a peasant movement at a wider level. It is also a starting point for peasants to be aware of their own potentialities to participate in wider struggle movements.

(2) The step of "Prasarn Krua-khai" or the "Promotion of Networking among Peasant Organizations"

The period from 1986 to 1990 was the period for the promotion of "Ong Korn Chao Ban" or "Villagers' Organizations" and the interlinkage of these peasant organizations. Various groups or community based organizations and the networks of the northeastern peasants were formed. The NGOs played a crucial role in organizing the exchange programmes providing the opportunities for peasants from various villages to meet, discuss, and share idea and experiences of development

alternatives. This step of promoting the networks among northeastern peasants to become the relatively autonomous organization beyond the level of community level is similar to what Fox and Cordillo mention about the struggle for "autonomy within the system" which "led to the consolidation of a new genre of grassroots-based, peasant-managed economic organizations (1989: 151).

(3) The step of "khleun Wai Ronnarong" or the "Promotion of Struggle Movements and Policy Campaign"

By the late 1980s, some peasant organizations and networks started their campaigns on development and environment problems such as, the anti-eucalyptus plantations campaigns, the anti-Pak Mun dam construction, the case of Dong Yai in Land-Forest reputation between the peasants and the state power, and the opposition against rocksalt mining in Mahasarakham Province, and so on.

At present, there are at least five networks of northeastern peasant organizations at regional level which include: the Support of the Committee of Farmer Movement, Northeast Local Handicrafts Network (or Women's Network), Northeast Alternative Agriculture Network, Northeast Cattle and Buffaloes-Raising Farmers Network, and Northeastern People's Network for the Resolution of Reforestation and Cultivated Land. All these networks and others peasant organizations are the counterparts of the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA). The role of NGOs is very crucial in mobilizing peasants to be aware of their interests and rights. Experience of northeastern Thai peasants in organizing themselves into groups and various forms of networks has brought about their confident to participate in peasant collective movements against the Thai state.

Chapter 4

PEASANT MOVEMENT AND ORGANIZATION IN THE NORTHEAST

4.1 What is Peasant Movement?

There are various views of social science theorists in defining a peasant movement or "*Khabuan Karn Chao Na*" in Thai. Dhanagare, for example, considers the term 'peasant movement' or 'agrarian movement,' which he used interchangeably in his study of "peasant movements in India during 1920-1950," as

all kinds of collective attempts of different strata of the peasantry either to change the system which, they felt, was exploitative, or to seek redress for particular grievances without necessarily aiming at overthrowing the system." (1986: 19)

In this viewpoint, the main components in defining peasant movement are "peasant" as the actor of the movement; "collective action" as the method used in achieving their goals. Generally, social science theorists who study peasant movements in various countries emphasize the "collective action" as an important method used in most cases of peasant movements (Wolf 1969, Landsberger 1974, Huizer 1980, etc.). Landsberger, for example, considers a collective reaction to low status as the essence of a peasant movement (1974: 20). But, using "collective reaction" to explain the nature of a peasant movement without considering various forms of action at different collective levels might be not enough to understand the nature of a peasant movement. In this regard, Andrew Turton proposes that

"not only the large scale, sometimes violent revolts and uprisings but also more modest mobilizations (rallies and demonstrations, deputations and petitions etc.) and a wide range of more everyday forms of resistance which, while often more individualistic, may also have a more collective significance." (1984: 65)

In sum, "peasant movement", in this research paper, refers to collective actions at different forms and levels of peasants in the struggles to defend their interests and rights. The concept of a peasant movement used in this study includes at least three components as follows:

- (a) it is a collective action of peasants (Landsberger 1974);
- (b) it can be either large or small in scale, but it serves to articulate the everyday experiences and practices of peasant struggle with wider

social movements (Turton 1986);

- (c) it's aim is to react, resist, or to change the current social structures which based on the mutual interests of actors involved (Dhanagare 1986).

4.2 Peasant Movements in the Northeast: The Background Information

The old forms of peasant struggles might be broadly divided into "individual based" and "collectively based" actions. The former is known as "everyday forms of peasant resistance" which emphasizes individual acts of resistance (Scott 1986) while the latter is based on organized collective actions. I will give a short description of what "individual based" resistance or "everyday forms of peasant resistance" is, and thereafter give a historical summary of collectively based peasant movements in northeastern Thailand.

"Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance"

"Everyday forms of peasant resistance," or individual based resistance, is basically the struggle of peasants for survival or to meet their basic needs. This kind of resistance is, according to Scott, "not directly to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive - today, this week, this season - within it" (1986: 30).

Historically, the Thai peasantry (and not only northeastern peasants) had always been dominated by local power-holders and nobles (*jao*) from the centre in Bangkok. Tax and corvee labour were the main burden upon the Thai peasantry. Resistance took various individual forms, for example, becoming a Buddhist monk to escape corvee labour, running away into the jungle, becoming "inert" workers, and expressing this resistance through various cultural forms such as satirical storytelling, traditional singing, reinterpretation of local history, and so on. At present, everyday forms of peasant resistance can be observed through the "defiance of laws restricting subsistence economic activity (hunting, gathering and other use of forest reserve land...), to regular joking and cursing about higher powers and authorities" (Turton 1986: 45), as well as indifference toward or an unwillingness in some government's programs. However, everyday forms of resistance are merely "defensive type of actions" (Scott 1986) in serving peasants' immediate needs and protecting their long-term cultural identities. These actions are the strength of everyday forms of peasant resistance,

especially since northeastern Thai peasants does not challenge state power directly. As a result, they can avoid direct repression from the state.

"Collectively Based Movements"

"A collectively based movement" or "an organized collective movement" is another form of peasant struggle which has been practised by northeastern Thai peasants since the late 16th century. According to a study of Chatthip, the first commoner revolt which can be understood as the first collectively based movement in the northeast was "the Boon Kwang Revolt," in 1699 (1984: 111). From 1699 to 1959, there had been several peasant revolts in the northeast which have been termed as 'holy men' revolts. By comparison with other Southeast Asian countries, Chatthip concludes that these millenarian-type revolts "were revolts in a backward society [which] occurred less frequently in Thai society, and on a smaller scale; and in recent times they have been less violent" (1984: 129-130). This corresponds to Turton's understanding of contemporary movements of Thai peasants. Turton suggests that "Thailand had no history of large-scale social movements of workers and peasants in recent decades" (1987: 3). However, peasant movements in the past did not really bring any positive changes to peasant lives or put pressure on the state. The usual outcome was that peasants were suppressed brutally by the state's coercive mechanisms.

After the Second World War, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) found supporters all over the country. In the northeast, peasants joined the CPT armed struggles in the jungles against the state in the 1960's. Though the revolutionary role of the CPT ended by the early 1980s, its movement helped raise the political awareness of the public and brought experience to some peasants in building bargaining power for peasants and workers through organized collective actions in demanding the state to solve their plight.

In 1974, the first collective peasant movement at the national level was established: the Peasant's Federation of Thailand (PFT) or "*Sahapan Chao Na Chao Rai Haeng Prathet Thai*" (Kanoksak 1987). By organizing collective actions, mainly demonstrations, the PFT tried to bring peasant problems to the attention of the government. It was the first time that peasants in an overt organized movement, were able to express their grievances and demand the authorities solve their economic hardships (Ratana 1986: 53-70). Also, the supporting roles of some progressive outsiders such as students, intellectuals, and writers were helpful

to peasant organizations. Some students and intellectuals helped mobilize peasants into groups in order to defend their interests. In the mean time, political, popular songs, called "songs for life," radical progressive books, short stories, novels, poems, and newspaper articles and columns about the plight of poor farmers and workers became widespread. The dissemination of these cultural works helped raise social and political awareness of the Thai public.

Prior to the 1980s, it was extremely risky for peasants to lead and organize their movements against the local power-holders without any strong support from outside allies. As Landsberger points out "in Latin America and Asia, with their tradition of extreme oppression and submission, and with no tradition of peasant literacy and participation in self-governing institutions, supplementation of leadership cadres from outside the peasantry was and is very frequent" (1974: 49).

The role of outsiders in supporting peasant movement is also very much important in the Thai case. The PFT for example, was organized by the strong effort of students rather than peasants themselves. Northeastern peasants also joined the PFT movement, though not on a large scale when compared to northern and central Thai peasants. Due to the fact that the problem of land in the northeast was not as serious as in the north and in the central regions, their protests and demonstrations were aimed at fighting the injustice stemming from the power and the threats of local authorities, rich farmers, and merchants. However, the movement of the PFT did not last long. Together, with all other main progressive movements in Thai society, the organization was severely suppressed after October 1976, when the military took power again¹.

In my view, the experience of the PFT, issuing direct demands to the state and confronting state power, provided important lessons for peasants, teaching them to be careful in their future collective struggles. Before the emergence of the PFT, most Thai people believed that peasants were not able to organize themselves to fight for their own rights and interests against the state. A piece of research from 1972 about the absence of peasant movements in Thailand

¹ During the three year movement of the PFT, about 48 peasant leaders were assassinated including those injured and unidentified (Kanoksak 1987: 161-166), followed by the massacre of students and other peaceful demonstrators at Thammasat University in the incident of October 6, 1976.

conducted by Kasit stated that "the lack of mobilization, the negligence on the part of the Thai elites, the concentration of power at the centre, all this helps to partly explain the absence of peasant movements in Thailand." (1972: 99)

In the beginning of the 1980s, some northeastern peasants organized themselves into groups in order to try to persuade the government to solve their immediate problems. Lessons learned from the experiences of the CPT and the PFT movements helped shape the strategic methods of the new struggle movements of northeastern Thai peasants.

4.3 Peasant Movements in the Northeast: The Case of the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA)

4.3.1 The Birth of the ESFA

The establishment of the ESFA was influenced by the idea of protecting the rights, dignity, and survival of small farmers. This idea derived from certain peasant leaders and NGO workers during the campaign against the government's proposal on the National Agricultural Council (NAC). This proposal was viewed by some peasant leaders and NGO workers as serving and protecting the interests of large-scale capitalist agriculture, especially the big agribusiness groups (Siam Rat, 31 August 1991).

The National Agricultural Council (NAC) was first initiated in August 1986 when General Prem Tinnasulanond, then the Prime Minister presented the government's policy on promoting the national representative organization of the agricultural sector to parliament (Siang Chum Chon 1993: 3). Since then, there have been various proposals on the establishment of the NAC from various political parties. In 1993, the Chuan government tried again to push the bill, as it was the major agricultural policy of that administration. But many NGO workers, academics, and peasant leaders strongly opposed it.

Though there are many different bills concerning the establishment and form of the NAC, the main characters and purposes of these bills have almost been the same. First, the proposed NAC is to be controlled by an executive board, of which half of the board members are to come from the agribusiness sector, merchants, and government officials. The other members are to be farmers appointed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (Siam Post, 1 November 1993). This means that the well-to-do farmers would control the council. As a consequence, the NAC

tends to serve the benefits of the capitalist farmers and agribusiness groups instead of small farmers. In short, the NAC is not organized by small farmers themselves and does not represent their interests at all (NE/NGO-Cord 1992: 52-54).

The northeast NGO networks and various northeastern peasant organizations have organized several meetings to consider these bills (NE/NGO-CORD: 1992: 49-50). They have also prepared a counter "people's bill" for the establishment of the "National Agricultural Council for Small Farmers (NAC-SF)" as an alternative. This draft bill was presented to various groups of northeastern Thai peasants in a conference organized by NGOs and peasant groups in March 1992. During the conference, the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA) was formally established to serve as the representative organization of northeastern Thai peasants. The strong opposition to the government's bill has made it difficult for the government to establish the NAC. Up to the present time, the bill is still pending.

4.3.2 The Approach and Organizational Structure of the ESFA

(1) The Goal of the ESFA

The ESFA's goal as written in its constitution is to protect the rights and interests of northeastern Thai peasants with their dignity seen as equal to other groups of people in Thai society (ESEA 1994: 2-3). Mr. Bamrung Khayotha, the present General Secretary of the ESFA, sees the ultimate goal of the ESFA as to strengthen the people's power and their organization in the long run (interview: 23 August 1995).

Being a representative organization of northeastern small farmers, the ESFA acts as the vanguard of various peasant groups in protecting peasants' interests, and as the intermediary organization in coordinating members with other supporting groups or alliances and government agencies to solve peasants' problems. In addition, it is very important for northeastern Thai peasants to have an opportunity to learn from and share with others outside their communities, as well as among themselves in the process of conducting their collective movements. This process raises their social and political awareness and makes them critical in analysing their subordinated position in Thai society. The increase of awareness of its members is in accordance with one of ESFA's objectives. That is, "promoting economic, educational, socio-cultural and

political roles as well as raising awareness of small farmers to fight for their dignity as equal of that of other social groups in Thai society" (ESFA 1994: 3).

(2) Strategy

In order to protect small farmers' interests and empower peasant organizations, the ESFA uses the engagement strategy to deal with the social, economic, and political problems facing by northeastern peasants. The main concept and characteristics of the engagement strategy are:

(a) Organizing for People's Power

The lack of bargaining power of small farmers economically and politically is one major cause of the continuity of the maldevelopment of agricultural and rural policies. According to Suthy Prasartset, this maldevelopment can be labelled as

"the 'transnationalized model of accumulation,'... which is based on the ideology of developmentalism, consumerism and militarism ...which is mainly growth-oriented, urban-biased and extremely oriented... [It] also almost unconditionally upholds the principle of free market...including promotion of foreign investment, export promotion, privatization, liberalization, and deregulation and market pricing of essential public services, etc." (Suthy 1995: 97-98)

The maldevelopment policy leads to unjust utilization of resources and of income distribution, through which the majority of small peasants became "economically bankrupt, highly indebted, and landless." (ESFA 1994: 22) To find a way out, northeastern peasants have to put all their efforts toward protecting their rights and long-term benefits. Building up and strengthening people's power is a major strategy of the ESFA in protecting the rights and interests of northeastern Thai peasants.

(b) Applying Pressure to Solve Problems

The ESFA uses a conflict model strategy- protests, rallies, and demonstrations- to demand that the authorities solve the problems of small farmers. Under the National Constitutional Law, the Thai citizens have the right to force and put pressure on the government and other concerned groups to consider their demands and assist them in solving their social, economic, and political problems.

(c) Building Alliances with other Social Power Groups

The ESFA seeks support from various persons and groups who have sympathy towards the plight of poor peasants and want to support social justice. The ESFA allies with some local voluntary groups such as school teacher groups, community-based groups, government-established organizations (e.g. farmers' associations), non-party political groups especially the NGOs networks, networks of teacher's unions, groups of local academic institutions in the region and others.

(3) The Organization of the ESFA: Leaders and Members

Within three years, since the formal establishment of the ESFA in 1992, the rapid growth of the ESFA, especially in terms of the exponential growth of its membership from around 3,000 to 30,000 has created difficulties in its management and coordination. The ESFA, a coordinating organization with a loose organizational structure, has a limited amount of voluntary staff in each secretariat office as well as a limited budget. All these limitations become underlying factors of administrative inefficiency of the ESFA. The following is a summary analysis of the ESFA's problems:

Leaders and Members

Leaders

Migdal suggests that, in general, one of the primary difficulties in building up strong, independent organizations to represent the interests of small farmers which could have a marked impact in national politics is the continuous disappearance of its leadership (1974: 222). In the case of northeastern Thai peasants, it is also difficult to find leaders of peasant organizations who are real peasants working on their farms. Migdal also points out that "peasants who work actively in peasant organizations are the ones with the resources needed for effectiveness in the political world: urban experience, education, and sufficient wealth to make the proper payments where needed. Only rarely do they remain living within the village in order to provide an indigenous leadership necessary for independent organization and initiative in the larger political system." (Ibid; 223)

ESFA leaders are local people from the northeastern region. Most of them are northeastern small farmers who were born in rural villages. The present General Secretary of ESFA, Bamrung Khayotha, is also from a poor peasant family. His father is a primary school teacher and also works on a farm. Bamrung has a higher

level of education when compared to his contemporaries in the northeast. He used to work in an urban area and had some experience with the labour union movements during the 1970s. In addition, he had some training by NGOs and used to work as "community organizer" in his home village.

Other committee members are also small farmers, with the exception of one who is a rural school teacher. At present, these ESFA leaders still work on their farms and help work as volunteer coordinators for the organization. It will be very interesting to see that in the near future, if the organization still remains, what kind of leaders ESFA will have. Perhaps, some changes might occur for, as Migdal sees it: "Leaders are increasingly defined as administrators rather than decision-makers, and the community's most respected members may now decline altogether to serve in official positions." (Ibid; 201)

Members

The exact number of ESFA members is difficult to count because ESFA is a kind of campaigning and coordinating organization. The ESFA is open to all small farmers who have been hurt by maldevelopment policies, human rights violations, and social injustice. Its members are not permanent; they are usually peasants living in villages, districts, and provinces of the northeast. Some of them may come to join the organization only when they are faced with severe social, economic, and political problems and are in desperate need for support from ESFA to express their requests to state authorities. This kind of purpose of ESFA's members is also similar to what Migdal considers the degree to which organizers can gain peasant support which "depends on the scope of the services they provide, the primacy of those services, and their degree of monopoly over the provision of the services." (Ibid; 215)

4.3.3 Financial Support

According to Bamrung Khayotha (Interview on August 23, 1995), ESFA does not receive any large grant support from outside as it aims to create a sense of self-reliance among its members. The income of ESFA derives from the membership fee and donation (in term of rice, money, food, labour, and so on) from small farmers every time ESFA organizes a protest. Occasionally, ESFA receives help from outside volunteers from its allied NGOs and other organizations such as Teachers' Federation and Duang Prateep (Bangkok Slum) Foundation (Siam Rat,

Vol.41, No.36).

Members pay their annual fee of 100 baht and another 10 baht for member card fee. 70% of the total fees is allocated for the expenses of the 6 provincial zone offices, and the rest of 30% is kept at each regional ESFA office. Regional General Secretary and the other 6 zone representatives have no salaries, but can reimburse for travelling and coordinating expenses according to the actual cost.

Nonetheless, ESFA receives some occasional limited grant from certain government agencies. For example, the Ministry of Agricultural and Cooperatives provides one temporary officer to be a coordinator between ESFA and the Ministry, and allows the ESFA staff to have a room as their temporary office in the Ministry building in Bangkok (Weeraphon, Interview: 23 August 1995).

4.3.4 Internal Problems of the Organization

Within three years since the formal establishment of ESFA in 1992, the rapid growth of ESFA, especially the rapid increasing number of members from around 3,000 to 30,000, has made a lot of difficulties in management and coordination. Due to the fact that ESFA is an coordinating organization, the structure is very loose with limited amount of voluntary staff in each secretariat office as well as limited budget. All these limitations are internal problems of this organization. The followings are the analysis of ESFA's problems:

(1) Problem of Administration

The Board of the Executive Committee mainly comprise farmers from six provincial zones and a regional GS, who have to work as ESFA policy-makers and practitioners simultaneously. It is good to make use of local farmers' abilities, but their knowledge and experiences are still not enough to deal with a large-scale organization and the social-economic-political problems occurring in the whole region. Thongchai Samasha, one of ESFA's consultant, points out that "To provide knowledge of related social structure ... it is necessary to set up the intensive training course for ESFA's Administrative Committee, peasant leaders in all divisions of ESFA organization" (Than Sestakit, 6-12 October, 1994). Thus, the Board of the Executive Committee has to seek some advice and support from its consultants who are unorganized and live scatterly in different places. These people work for ESFA voluntarily like "ad hoc" committee. ESFA cannot rely on them to help run the organization efficiently.

Besides, as all seven ESFA Committee are both policy-makers and managers in their zone and regional offices, Mr. Bamrung Khayotha points out that "these Committee members, including he himself, possess mainly organizing skills, not administrative skills" (Interview, 23 August 1995). Thus, it is very difficult for them to do both type of tasks properly at a time. One ESFA coordinator views that ESFA lacks a professional administrator, experienced staff, and enough number of its staff to work in the regional office to help coordinate and make follow-up of work, especially conscientizing work at the zone level (Weeraphon: Interview, 23 August 1995).

In addition, the Committee members who work for ESFA as volunteers need to earn their living through their occupations such as, being a farmer or a teacher. It is difficult for these people to find the time to do the work for ESFA and to earn money for their families at the same time.

(2) Problems of Members

Most of ESFA members have a limited understanding of the ESFA goals and roles as the representative relative autonomous organization. Many of them join ESFA because they have no other choices and ESFA has proved to be their only supporter. After they gain what they want, these members do not have a sense of help building and strengthening the organization. They just return to do their own business. Thus, the organizational consciousness and sense of belonging of ESFA members have to be prepared as to strengthen the organization in the long-term.

In 1994, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives agreed to set up the "Khor Por Ror" project to help farmers to switch to more promising cash crop growing or to some other alternatives. Through this program, farmers will be provided with agricultural loans with low interest rate and long grace period of loan repayment. As ESFA proved to be the most prominent representative of small farmers during the last two years of its movement, the Ministry agreed to give priority to ESFA members in receiving benefits from the *Khor Por Ror* project. Each member will receive 200,000 baht of loan and have to repay within 15 years. Thus, some farmers come to join ESFA just to take 200,000 baht from "Khor Por Ror" project. They do not think about the long-term goal and organizational building of ESFA. Once they get what they want, they leave the organization (Weeraphon: Interview, 23 August 1995).

(3) Problems of monetary and accounting system

Monetary and accounting system is the most weakpoint of ESFA. According to Bamrung Khayotha, "every division is facing this problem" (Interview, 23 August 1995). In March 1995, the Board of ESFA had appointed the Monetary Supervision Committee (MSC) to solve this problem (Phu Jaad Karn, 20 April 1995). There were some accusations that in some areas the members of ESFA had to pay 500 baht to some committee members or consultants of ESFA to be able to apply for the *Khor Por Ror* project. According to the investigation of the MSC, there was one case that the committee received the donation from peasant members in order to support the organization. But this case was not related to the *Kor Por Ror* project. In this case, the MSC suggested to return those money back to the members (Phu Jaad Karn, 20 April 1995)

To conclude, the establishment of ESFA originated during the campaign against government's policies which have tended to favour the benefits of large-scale capitalist agriculture and agribusiness entrepreneurs rather than the benefits of small farmers. ESFA was established by a number of peasant organizations which had developed from small-scale community-based organizations since the 1980s. The main supporters of ESFA are certain groups of NGOs whose strategy is aimed at empowering people at the grass-roots level. These NGOs help mobilize northeastern Thai peasants to build up their relatively autonomous organizations to solve their social, economic, and political problems.

Chapter 5

PEASANT MOVEMENT UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF ESFA

After the establishment of ESFA in March 1992, the organization joined the rally of northeastern Thai peasants who faced the problem of the *Kor Jor Kor* Project, a land rights dispute wherein the state evicted thousands of northeastern farmers from designated "forest preserves". The rally, organized by various peasant organizations and receiving strong support from NGOs in the region, was held in July 1992 at *Pak Chong* District of *Nakhon Ratchasima* Province. The result of the rally led to the abolition of the project. By the end of that year, ESFA restructured its organization when an actual farmer, Mr. Bamrung Khayotha, assumed the position of General Secretary of the organization. The following year the ESFA began organizing several demonstrations and making various demands of the government.

5.1 The Collective Actions of the ESFA

From 1993 to 1995, the ESFA has organized collective demonstrations to demand that the government solve the aforementioned three urgent problems facing their peasant constituency. The following are the main collective actions of northeastern Thai peasants under the leadership of the ESFA.

(1) Cassava Issue and Pig Raising: The Beginning of the Contemporary Peasant Demonstration

The first ESFA demonstration was organized after peasant representatives failed to convince the government to consider their complaints. The demonstration of cassava farmers was held in the District of Nong Kie in Buriram Province in March 1992. It must be noted here that most cassava growers are farmers who have already engaged fully in the market economy through an earning of their incomes by selling cassava crops, though most of them are small or marginal farmers who know very little about the process of tapioca export to the EC market. This group of northeastern Thai peasants can be considered to be a source of political change in rural areas, as viewed by Paige, who has studied peasant collective movements in agricultural export economy zones (1975: 3).

The second demonstration was organized by the Northeastern Pig Raising Cooperatives. This demonstration, though gaining very little support from NGOs,

was very important, as it became a vanguard for peasants opposing government policies aiming to promote control of agricultural production and marketing in the form of contract farming by large-scale agribusiness groups. Small farm producers are treated, by this government's policy, as a subordinated group which can hardly survive.

In my view, the reason for the lack of support from NGOs was due very much to the type of these pig raising farmers these were. These NGOs have preferred a withdrawal strategy because, firstly, most NGO workers are not as poor as marginal farmers. Secondly, those peasants' production depends very much on the market economy. And thirdly, their cooperatives, already registered and under the control of the government, are strong enough to become a kind of interest group.

Even though there was no strong support from NGOs, the movement managed to continue and achieve its goal in bargaining with the state. After two days of demonstrations, with the strong measure of closing the highway in *Mahasarakham* Province by around 4,000 members of the Northeastern Pig Raising Cooperatives, the Deputy Minister of Commerce came to negotiate with ESFA. The solutions to the problems include: firstly, the government will provide loans at no interest to pig farmers as proposed by these cooperatives through setting up a "Fund for Assisting Farmers"; secondly, the government promises to change the law allowing the monopoly of agribusiness groups, such as *Charoen Pokhaphan* (CP), over the slaughter of pigs and the selling of pork. However, despite many promises from the government, no practical measures have been taken (ESFA 1994: 4).

The government tried to solve the problems of these two groups of northeastern peasants by accepting their demands and promising to find appropriate solutions. This style of problem-solving is merely a rhetorical agreement without any real effect. Nonetheless, peasants are not stopping their collective actions; when they force the government to listen to them, at least the government tries to deal with their problems immediately. On the other hand, if they keep quiet and use only the withdrawal strategy, they follow up their complaints by going through the hierarchy of the bureaucracy and then wait for the government to respond. In most cases, they hardly receive any response from the government agencies concerned. From these experiences, ESFA then continues to use a power-group strategy by organizing demonstrations for all cases of northeastern peasants.

(2) Cashew Nuts: Destruction From the Four-Partite Project

The promotion of cashew nut plantations, as a new alternative for farmers suffering from the falling price of tapioca, is one of the many serious problems resulting from the government's four-partite agricultural project involving state authorities, private investors, the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), and farmers.

After five years of participating in the project, due to the unproductivity of the seedlings, farmers have gained nothing but increased debts. On average, each cashew-nut farmer is in debt with the BAAC to the tune of about 100,000 baht (ESFA 1994: 5).

In June 1993, the first rally of cashew nut grower was staged. Around 3,000 cashew nut farmers from various provinces in the northeast gathered in Roi Et Province for five days. The government agreed to set up a tri-partite committee to help remedy the situation. In negotiations between the representatives of ESFA and of government, nine resolutions were signed. This act was an initially positive meeting between the government who, by its function, was responsible for the four-partite project, and the farmers, who, without knowing their future, were going to become bankrupt by this project.

After the tri-partite committee was appointed by the government, meetings and seminars were organized from the regional to the district levels. The organization of "Northeastern Cashew Nut Growers" was set up. Plans for a long-term recovery project for northeastern cashew nut growers were laid out by peasant members with the academic support from certain NGOs and academic institutions. But there was no sincere commitment from the government to solve the problems of these peasants seriously. The situation after demonstrations of northeastern peasants always seems to result in the issue of empty agreements without any real action from the government.

(3) The Demand of "Three Main Issues-Nine Problems"

In October 1993, various groups of northeastern peasants started the second rally to demand from the government an active interest in solving their problems as promised. In addition to the problems proposed to the government in the previous demonstration, new issues from other groups of peasants were included. This new strategy of ESFA aimed to unify and integrate all problems faced by their members. Since then, ESFA has repeatedly emphasized "three main issues-nine

problems" in its campaign for public understanding and support for its collective actions, demanding that the government solve these problems.

The demand of "three main issues-nine problems" was presented to the government in the National Parliament by ESFA representatives on 29 September 1993. ESFA asked the government to set up a meeting between both sides initiate negotiations within one month. After the deadline, there was no reaction from the government even though ESFA had sent many letters of appeal. On the contrary, the government tried to use the state coercive mechanism in threatening some of ESFA's leaders on many occasions (ESFA 1994: 7). Thus, ESFA made decision to start the second rally.

The rally was organized by around 3,000 ESFA members from ten provinces who had gathered in Kuchinarayana District of Kalasin province on 19 October 1993. The demonstration continued for seven days and then moved to Roi Et Province, around 60 kilometres away. The government tried to stop the demonstration by sending the Minister of Commerce to negotiate with ESFA's representatives in Roi Et. The Minister promised to present ESFA's demands to the Cabinet in early November. The demonstration was then temporarily stopped to prepare food and to mobilize more peasants. To force the government to take its demands into account, ESFA staged a "sit-in" at Lam Ta Kong in Nakhon Ratchasima Province on 31 October 1993. This time 10,000 to 15,000 villagers from four sub-districts of See Khiew district in Nakhon Ratchasima, who had suffered from the land rights conflict, actively joined the demonstration.

The refusal of the government, combined with accusation that the demonstration was backed up by the oppositional parties forced the government to send groups of authorities to threaten the demonstrators and force them to go back home. ESFA then decided to march on Bangkok, starting along the highway heading to the capital, about 200 kilometres away.

After the protesters arrived in the District of Pak Chong 30 kilometres from where they had started, the government, represented by the head of the police, General Pratin Santiprapob, sent a helicopter to ask ESFA's representatives to go to Bangkok for negotiations. The result of the negotiations was that the government accepted the demands of "three main issues-nine problems" and agreed to set up the new tri-partite sub-committee for problem-solving, thus ending the second rally.

"Three Main Issues-Nine Problems"

The "three main issues" are:

Issue 1: Problems caused by government policy, such as the four-partite project and dam construction projects.

Issue 2: Problems related to land-forest conflicts between the state and villagers, such as the conflict over land rights in forest reserve areas, land rights over public land, and land occupation of villagers on the King's private properties.

Issue 3: Problems of low prices for farm produce such as paddy rice, pork, and cassava.

The "nine problems" are:

- (1) low paddy prices
- (2) low cassava prices
- (3) failure of cashew-nut growing
- (4) failure of brahman cow raising
- (5) failure of silkworm rearing
- (6) problems related to the destruction of small-scale pig raising cooperatives
- (7) problems related to the construction of infrastructure
- (8) problems concerned with land occupation of northeastern peasants
- (9) problems caused by the government's agricultural policy in controlling small farmers through the establishment of the National Agricultural Council (NAC)

(Source: ESFA 1994).

(4) The Second Round of "Three Main Issues-Nine Problems": The Long March to Bangkok

The Long March to Bangkok has become a major tactic of ESFA's leaders in organizing its peasant members in the effort to convince the government to help solve their problems sincerely and seriously. The other benefit from this strategy has been that it has helped raise the awareness of peasants (especially

those who joined the rally) in using people's power to defend their interests and rights. It also arouses public opinion, urging people to question why those poor peasants had moved out of their rice fields to walk so far along the highway. What are their problems? Moreover, it brings solidarity and various kinds of support from peasant allies such as students, urban slum people, workers, and villagers who live near the highway. However, there is another effect of this strategy. Peasants may be accused of being "trouble makers," "the mob-rule promoters," or "economic and cultural destroyers."

The third rally started in February 1994, after three months of unproductive action from the government in solving peasant problems. While ESFA leaders were preparing for the next demonstration by coordinating with and collecting contributions from their members in the form of money, food, and transportation, there happened to be a demonstration conducted by a village group suffering from the flood caused by the construction of the Lam Sae Dam in Khon Buri District of Nakhon Ratchasima Province (ESFA 1994: 9). The village group demanded the government compensate its members, as they had been evacuated from their homes and farmlands. They had to sacrifice their property to the so-called "national development" projects (ESFA: 14, Bangkok Post, 13 February 1994). When they asked for help from ESFA, the organization then mobilized its peasant members to gather in the Lam Ta Kong area of Nakhon Ratchasima, which had been used many times as an important base for previous demonstrations.

On 7 February 1994, as the government's attention began to wane again, ESFA sent the first group of peasants and its representatives as a vanguard to Bangkok. The second group walked and drove their four-wheel farmer trucks along the highway to Bangkok. They were stopped by police many times. They were about 60 kilometres from Lam Ta Kong when police seized their trucks at Klang Dong subdistrict of Pak Chong district in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. A group of 3,000 peasants decided to leave their trucks and continued their march by walking along the side-road of the highway to avoid causing traffic congestion and obstruction. When the demonstrators arrived at the bridge, which forms a border between the northeast and the central region, a troop of commandos obstructed them, so they instead decided to walk across the stream to avoid violence. Because the demonstrators were peaceful and avoided fighting with government authorities, they were able to cull support from villagers who live near the highway, among others. Food, medicine, drinking water, and other necessities were donated by

sympathetic villagers, students, and journalist groups, and even Buddhist monks came to pray for them (ESFA 1994: 10). The demonstration ended after seventeen long days. The government then promised to solve all nine problems and set up another committee to monitor and follow-up the operation of the concerned government agencies.

(5) The Unfinished Rallies of Northeastern Peasants

The fourth rally of the ESFA was organized in January 1995, eleven months after the last. ESFA considered the repeated failure of the government in responding to their demands concerning the "nine problems" as sufficient reason to mobilize its members and put pressure on the government. Since 15 February 1993, the committee appointed by the government to monitor and follow-up the activities of the concerned government agencies had held only three meetings. Though many problems were neglected and solutions delayed, a few problems were responded to positively by the government.

After ESFA started the rally by organizing demonstrations in Loei and Roi Et Provinces, 15,000 villagers gathered again in the Lam Ta Kong area of Nakhon Ratchasima Province. This time, the new issue of rock-grinding concessions in Loei was added to their list of grievances. The rally continued for eight days, after which ESFA's representatives went to meet the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperative in Bangkok. Following that meeting, the government formed yet another joint committee between the representatives of ESFA and of the government to take care of the issues. In addition, it was reported that government officials in Loei Province had ordered three rock-grinding concession companies to stop their operations after receiving several complaints from villagers.

5.2 The Present Situation of the ESFA Movement

After the Joint Committee was established, there was only one meeting held, on 27 March 1995, in Mahasarakham Province (Phu Jaad Karn, 18 April 1995). The result of the meeting was not clear. ESFA organized its own meeting to consider the government's tactic of delaying and avoiding problem-solving and to evaluate the work of the Joint Committee. It saw two major problems that had not been addressed: that of rock-grinding concessions; and that of the *Khor Por Ror* Project, which offered alternative farming projects for peasants who grow cassava, cashew nuts, and other produce.

Moreover, there were other serious problems for northeastern Thai peasants, such as those incurred by the Khong-Chee-Mun Project, opposition to the construction of Pong Khun Pet Dam in Chaiyaphum province, and land ownership rights distributed to rich business persons in the South under the *Sor Por Kor* 4-01 Land Reform Program. The failure of the government in dealing with any and all of these problems set the conditions for the possible emergence of peasant movements in the near future.

On 23 April 1995, more than 600 villagers from 18 villages in the *Wangsapung* District of *Loei* Province went to Bangkok demanding that the government close down three rock-grinding operations as promised in the aftermath of the fourth rally in February 1995 (*Siam Post*, 24 April 1995). The villagers accused those three companies of illegally blasting rock outside of the concession areas. Moreover, the companies were not complying with regulations restricting the amount of time per day they could blast rock, and instead they were blasting 24 hours a day. Mr. Pravian Bunnak, one of the ESFA's leaders, said that the villagers wanted the government to close down the companies permanently or else the protestors would not disperse. They said that if blasting continued, villagers would die from inhaling the particles of dust created by the blasting and pulverizing of rock. Eventually, they were threatened by the owners of the companies, who were also the local mafia in the area (*Siam Post*, 24 April 1995).

On April 24, 1995, the Director of the Land Department permanently cancelled the concession given to those three rock-grinding operations (*Siam Post*, 12 July 1995). However, shortly after the ban, the government allowed those companies to start operating again. On 11 July 1995, Mr. Pravian Bunnak, an active leader in protesting the rock-grinding operations in *Loei* province, was shot dead in front of the *Wangsapung* District Office in *Loei* Province (*Siam Post*, 12 July 1995).

In May 1995, there were various demonstrations led by the ESFA in five provinces such as *Nong Bualamphu*, *Roi Et*, *Amnat Charern*, and *Nakhon Ratchasima*. The main issue was the *Kor Por Kor* project. About 1,000 ESFA members went to demonstrate in front of the Provincial Government Houses demanding for the implementation of a real agreement between the government and ESFA since February of the previous year (*Phu Jaad Karn*, 16 May 1995). Before ESFA started its fifth rally, however, the government dissolved Parliament in May 1995 and left the peasants' problems for a new administration.

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5.3 The Modest Demands

The demands made by ESFA have been, step by step, adjusted to be effective and suitable for protecting the rights and interests of its members as a whole, and to represent northeastern Thai peasants. The following are the modest demands which ESFA has made to the government.

(1) The demand on land and forestry policy

ESFA requests the government to provide proper legal land ownership rights and a real land reform program to small farmers. In addition, ESFA asks the government to amend the present land law which does not represent the interests of small farmers, and to issue a clear and fair forest policy and demarcation;

(2) the demand on the solution of indebtedness of small farmers as a result of the agricultural development policies of the government

ESFA demands the government abolish loans of some agricultural development projects which do not bring any benefits to small farmers. Instead, these development projects have caused them bankruptcy. In addition, ESFA requests that the government extend the period of loan repayment for small farmers who are bankrupt as a consequence of participating in government agricultural development projects. Moreover, ESFA asks the government to provide credit, subsidies, and budget allocations to registered agricultural organizations, and to give an opportunity to small farmers to participate in the government's agricultural development projects and receive financial support from the government budget;

(3) the demand concerning the preservation of natural resources and the environment

ESFA demands the government to review all dam construction projects in the northeast in terms of whether they will bring disaster to small farmers and the natural environment. Villagers' organizations should have a say in the process of policy-making decisions concerning concessions of all natural resources, including logging, mineral ore, soil and stones, reservoirs, water resources, and so on.

5.4 The Government's Responses

Since the first rally over the cashew nut issue in June 1993, the government has acted on the demands of ESFA by setting up three levels of tri-partite committees at the national, provincial and district levels, respectively. Each set of committees is comprised of three representatives from the government, three from ESFA's membership, and three from NGOs and academics. A few problems were solved immediately, while most of them have become part of a process of policy making or delayed in implementation. The following is a summary of actions made by the government in response to the demands of ESFA.

(1) The First Rally of Cashew Nut Growers

In response to the demands made by cashew-nut growers, the government sent the Secretary of the Ministry of Finance to meet with ESFA representatives in Roi Et Province where both parties agreed to set up a tri-party committee for solving the problems of cashew-nut farmers. The tri-party committee consisted of ESFA representatives, NGOs and academics, and government representatives. The committee was organized at three levels: national, provincial, and district.

The proposed resolution of the government included an extension of the grace period to fifteen years on loan repayment for farmers resulting from debts incurred from the four-party agricultural project. During the first ten years of this period, farmers will be charged no interest. The second five years they will be charged six percent interest annually.

Moreover, the government will provide new funds for cashew-nut farmers with a low annual interest rate of three to six percent. The debts of cashew-nut growers will later be reexamined by the tri-partite committee. In the event that cashew nut production is too low, the committee will cancel their debts altogether.

After the resolution between ESFA and the government was reached, a national tri-partite committee was set up. Although it met several times, there was no effect in terms of practice, and so the second rally soon followed.

(2) The Second Rally on "Three Issues-Nine Problems" of Northeastern Small-Scale Farmers

The government set up various committees to investigate these issues and problems and promised to have their demands recognized by the cabinet within one

month. However, there was not much done in terms of problem-solving by these committees. The tri-partite sub-committees organized only three meetings during eleven months (ESFA, 27 January 1995). Then ESFA decided to launch another demonstration.

(3) The Third Rally: The Long March to Bangkok

The government agreed to solve all "three issues-nine problems" signed by the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives with a cabinet resolution. The ad hoc committee to follow up on the implementation was then appointed by the government (ESFA 1994: 11).

It was reported by the ad hoc committee that on five issues, the cashew nut project, the paddy mortgage scheme, the sericulture project, the so-called plastic cow project, and compensation to people displaced by the construction of the Lam Sae reservoir, an agreement was reached between the government and ESFA. Regarding the land issue, villagers who had encroached upon state land before 1952 would be given land ownership rights while others would either be allowed to rent or would be given the right to continue using the land to make a living (Bangkok Post, 12 February 1994).

In regard to the Brahman Cow Raising project, the government responded to the demands of farmers positively. It must be noted that this is the only problem with a successful solution in terms of practice (ESFA 1994: 13). However, ESFA found that there were problems occurring at the local level when district authorities in many cases proved not to follow through with the government's agreements and, in some cases, created conflicts between ESFA's members and non-members.

(4) The Fourth Rally on "Three Issues-Nine Problems"

The government agreed to set up a joint committee between itself and ESFA to monitor the implementation measure taken to resolve "three issues-nine problems." The committee reported that the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives had coordinated with the concerned government agencies to implement solutions to all of the issues based on the agreement between the government and ESFA. However, some problems still remained, as there were limiting factors such as local authorities failing to follow through with the joint resolutions (Siam Post, 25 January 1995).

5.5 Conclusion of ESFA's Movement

From 1993 to 1995, there were nine urgent problems faced by ESFA's members. Those problems can be categorized into three sets.

The first set deals with the low price of farm products like paddy and tapioca. These two crops, as mentioned in Chapter 2, are the main produce of the northeast which generate a high export value. However, most of the benefits remain in the hands of exporters, traders, and local merchants rather than in those of the producers.

The second set is related to the crisis facing peasants who joined the government's agricultural policy of reducing the areas of cassava cultivation and of promoting other types of occupations, such as growing cashew nuts under the four-party agricultural project, silkworm-rearing for industrial promotion, and Brahman cow raising for dairy farms.

The third set deals with problems resulting from the growth of infrastructure to serve the urban industrial sector, and from the absolute control of large-scale capitalist entrepreneurs over small-farm production.

These three sets of problems are the results of the long term socio-economic changes in this region since the implementation of the first National Economic Development Plan in the early 1960s.

The demands of ESFA changed from a single issue facing a specific group of small farmers, such as cassava or cashew nut farmers, into a multi-issue oriented movement facing various groups of peasants all over the northeast.

ESFA has organized various rallies to pressure on the government to solve their members' urgent problems. However, the demands have not been resolved immediately due to the circumstances such as the uncertainty of government policy, the 'red tape' bureaucratic system, and the problem of coordinating among the concerned agencies. Besides, it took time for the government to solve the problems which affected to not only ESFA's members but also those peasants in the northeast and other regions.

The government always tried to solve the problems of northeastern peasants by accepting their demands and promising to find appropriate solutions. This style of problem-solving is merely a rhetorical agreement without any real effect. Nonetheless, peasants are not stopping their collective actions; when they force the government to listen to them, at least the government tries to deal with their problems immediately. On the other hand, if they keep quiet and

use only the withdrawal strategy, they follow up their complaints by going through the hierarchy of the bureaucracy and then wait for the government to respond. In most cases, they hardly receive any response from the government agencies concerned. From these experiences, ESFA then continues to use a power-group strategy by organizing demonstrations for all cases of northeastern peasants.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The establishment of ESFA marked a historic event for northeastern Thai peasants in organizing themselves into collective actions to defend their interests and demand their rights from the state.

Formally established in 1992, ESFA is a grassroots organization initiated by and comprised of only peasants. Barely three years old, ESFA has recorded a dramatic increase in membership, from 3,000 peasant-members in 1992 to 30,000 in 1995. This overwhelming response from peasants reflects a changing attitude among northeastern peasants. Through ESFA, peasants have become active actors in the development of the country. ESFA has begun a process of institutionalizing collective peasant involvement in political and economic matters in civil society, and in particular, in government affairs.

6.1 The Emergence of a Powerful Organization

The emergence of ESFA is a result of the long-term social, economic, and political changes in Thai society. The major problems faced by northeastern Thai peasants are land scarcity, farm production and marketing, high indebtedness, poverty, and especially, government policies aimed at destroy small-scale farm production through the establishment of the National Agricultural Council (NAC). These problems have been caused by the "maldevelopment" policies of the Thai government during the last four decades.

How Did the ESFA Come About?

With strong support from non-governmental organizations, ESFA was organized in response to the continued worsening conditions of the peasantry, due primarily to the lack of concern for the welfare of peasants by the state. The priority accorded to the commoditization of the agricultural sector, for instance, has threatened peasants' access to land. For peasants, the loss of access to land is synonymous to the loss of life.

The emergence of ESFA is a result of the joint efforts of various groups of NGOs and peasant organizations in the northeast in opposing the government's policy of establishing the National Agricultural Council (NAC). The aim of this

oppositional movement is to protect the survival of small-scale farm production. Having used many methods to extract surplus from the agricultural sector in order to promote the growth of industrial sector, the Thai state has tried to create the NAC to be a new controlling mechanism to guarantee its development policy of large-scale capitalist agricultural production and agro-industries. The emergence of ESFA as a powerful representative organization of northeastern Thai peasants has made it difficult for the Thai state to institute the NAC.

Why Was It Necessary to Establish ESFA?

In Thailand, many government-established organizations hardly serve the real needs of their peasant members. As Akin points out, "Thai farmers never accept such groups [farmers' association] or cooperatives as their own organizations. On the contrary, their perception on those government-established groups is similar to government agencies whose role is only to provide credit for them." (Akin 1980: 52) These kinds of organizations cannot act as representative organizations of northeastern Thai peasants. The establishment of ESFA then becomes an alternative for small farmers to have a new form of a relatively autonomous organization to protect their immediate and long-term interests.

In addition, the establishment of ESFA has provided an alternative for northeastern Thai peasants in building up their bargaining power. Past experiences have shown that individual action is unable to counteract the strong influence of other social power groups especially the state power or the ruling "power bloc" (Turton 1989b). Small dispersed and isolated groups of peasants have not also succeeded to put enough pressure on the state to solve their problems. It is, thus, necessary for ESFA, the coordinating organization of northeastern Thai peasants, to be a vanguard for the rights of poor peasants and to be the mechanism to empowering them.

What Kind of Organization Is ESFA?

Farrington classifies organization into two: membership and non-membership organizations (1993: 3). Membership organizations (such as farmers' organization) are those organizations that are staffed and elected by the people they are meant to serve and represent. Non-membership organizations are staffed by people who are socially, professionally and at times ethnically different from their clients. ESFA is a membership organization of northeastern Thai peasants. In

ESFA, the solidarity of this "membership" is reflected in the willingness of the members to pay annual membership fees which is uncommon among organizations in Thailand. In addition, ESFA proves to be the only self-supported organization of northeastern peasants with demonstrated capabilities in self-governance through their own decisions, e.g. about means and ends. This kind of organization which represents the interests of peasants without being controlled by external groups qualifies ESFA as a "relatively autonomous organization." (Fox and Gordillo 1989)

6.2 ESFA's Strategies

Regarding the strategies of ESFA to mobilize peasants into collective actions, the engagement strategy has proved to be its main strategic model in building up bargaining power. The participation of ESFA's members during its demonstrations pressured the state to recognize that peasant demands and problems were serious, and needed to be solved immediately.

Nonetheless, the withdrawal strategy or inward orientation has also been suitable for peasants who want to minimize their participation within capitalist farm production, and instead emphasize more on production for the self-sufficiency of their own families. Thus, the selection of either of these two strategies depends on how peasants think about their livelihood and a development alternative suitable to them.

Presently, various groups of northeastern Thai peasants, especially those who receive strong support from NGOs in the region, find themselves in the process of delinking or withdrawal from the capitalist system. In contrast, others who have engaged in cash crop production and some peasants who have been faced with conflicts over land rights with the state and capitalists have gone more for the engagement strategy. ESFA is an example of a peasant organization in the northeast whose struggles are based on the engagement strategy.

Nonetheless, I argue that peasants in the contemporary world cannot escape from capitalist agricultural production. Thus, it is necessary for them to confront and make use of it. I share the view with Migdal that the withdrawal inward strategy which calls for, "the minimization of outside ties, the self-sufficiency of the family, the subsistence orientation--was never accepted by all villagers equally cheerfully" (1974: 16).

In my view, the best strategy for northeastern peasants is to apply the strong aspects of both the engagement and withdrawal strategies to empower their

organizations and collective actions. In building up bargaining power, the engagement strategy should be applied. After demands are met by the state, peasants then need to strengthen their self-sufficiency farm production for their families first, and thus, the withdrawal strategy should be implemented.

Regardless of whatever strategy peasants have adopted in their struggles, the most important thing, as I observed from various movements of northeastern peasants, is the degree of mutual cooperation among peasants in selecting solutions to their problems.

Building Alliances

Peasants' allies, for Landsberger, are crucial in assisting the establishment of a peasant movement. He points out that in order to reach their goals, peasants also need to find support and solidarity from other social groups by alliance building. Landsberger suggests that "if the peasantry does take the initiative and has no allies, it is generally unsuccessful. By itself, it is too weak and its antagonists are too strong, for the peasantry to gain its objectives." (1974: 62)

For ESFA, it should continue forming alliances without sacrificing its independence. From examining the process of alliance building of ESFA, I find that ESFA has reinterpreted the patronage idea to serve the interests of poor peasants. That is, rather than speaking of peasants as clients of other social groups, peasants should make alliances with them instead. Outside allies can help support peasants to fight for their survival and needs, and, in some ways, can protect them from being severely exploited by some other patrons.

Most of ESFA allies are local organizations (e.g. village committees, subdistrict council), government-established organizations (e.g. agricultural cooperatives, farmers' associations) and non-party political groups, such as NGOs, rural teacher networks, as well as groups from academic institutions in the region. The roles of these allies vary depending upon specific needs and conditions of each case and area. Generally, these allies can provide morale and some financial support, some information and knowledge of laws and the social system, and organizational management skills for peasants. Some of these allies can play a more important role for ESFA, such as being ESFA's academic consultants, representing ESFA in negotiating with the government, organizing seminars and providing training for ESFA's Board of Executive Committee and

staff, and serving on ad hoc working committees on behalf of ESFA on specific issues with the representatives from the government agencies.

Among allies of ESFA, NGOs whose aim is to support grassroots movements could be regarded as the most important allies to peasants. Most northeastern NGOs have played an important role in supporting the movement of ESFA. The support and rural development work of these NGOs since the early 1980s have paved the way for northeastern peasants to strengthen their community-based organizations at the village level, and to encourage networking among peasant organizations in collective joint efforts at a regional level. The emergence of various groups and networks of northeastern Thai peasants has brought about the new situation in the northeast where peasants began to play an active role in solving their economic hardships. According to Landsberger, "the existence of strong communities with previous experience in co-operation, or at least with knowledge of each other, facilitates the organization of peasants." (1974: 46)

Nonetheless, we have to be careful when considering this type of relationship between ESFA and these NGOs. First, the two movements which each represents respectively are not the same, as they represent different groups of actors and interests; second, they can help support the movements of one another, but should not replace or dominate each other; third, competition between these two movements can be disastrous, obstructing the growth of both movements, and will not help sustain either in the long run; and lastly, in the process of supporting the growth of peasant movements, NGOs should not replace the state agencies by being a new patron for peasants, as this kind of patron attitude would hinder the growth of peasant movements and lead eventually to the dependency of peasants on NGOs.

In addition, building alliances with other social groups such as urban slum people, worker unions, some factions of the middle class, and some government agencies has proved to be helpful for ESFA's growth, as alliances have strengthened its movement and bargaining power in defending the interests of northeastern peasants.

Legitimacy

In Thai society, it is difficult to legitimize any overt challenge to the power of the state such as protests, strikes, and demonstrations, though people do these according to their basic rights written in Thai constitutional law.

In general, peasant resistance to the state is considered to be harmful, and is only barely understood or accepted by the public. Under certain political conditions, such as during the period of a relatively open democracy, and when internal conflicts among the ruling factions exist, peasant protests and demonstrations are possible at a certain level. During the past two years, the ESFA has often staged protests, demonstrations, and rallies, demanding the government help solve peasants' problems. The only way for ESFA to legitimize its movement and to protect its members' interests is to create bargaining power by organizing and empowering small farmers. Demonstrations, protests, and strikes held by ESFA are not only to put pressure on the government to take the demands of small farmers into account, but also to make the public aware of the plight of small farmers in order to gain more public acceptance and to legitimize its movement.

As experienced during the third rally of ESFA's collective actions, the media's support has been very helpful. It makes possible for a widespread dissemination of information to the peasantry and the general public on peasant issues. Generating public support for peasants' issues will increase peasants' bargaining position with the state or other interest groups.

Moreover, the role of the mass media in Thai society has become another informal institution to check and balance the power of the state. In my view, with the help of the media, ESFA can communicate with the public and inform them of peasants' problems in order to legitimize collective peasant actions. During the third rally, Mr. Bamrung Khayotha, the General Secretariat of ESFA affirmed that the power of the media was "an important factor making this protest successful is the mass media-- The media helps so much. They bring our problems into the light, showing that villagers are really desperate. We have been so troubled that we felt we could not survive," (Bangkok Post, 18 February 1994).

6.3 Some Major Achievements of ESFA

ESFA offers an alternative for peasants who recognize the futility of individual action to resolve their economic difficulties. A highly concentrated power structure represented by the state in alliance with national and local elites can only be countered with peasant power originating from collective actions guided by a common cause.

Some major achievements of the ESFA are as follows:

(1) ESFA has gained recognition from the government as a truly representative organization of and by northeast Thai peasants.

The recognition is manifested by the invitation of ESFA representatives by the government to join government initiated committees to study about relevant agricultural problems and to help solve urgent problems faced by ESFA's members, and northeastern peasants as a whole. This achievement can be considered major when taking into account that, during the past twenty years, the Thai state has been adamantly against the formation of peasant movements outside those established by the government.

Moreover, some government agencies also try to coordinate with ESFA and give support such as providing facilities and allowing ESFA to use the government building as ESFA's temporary office in Bangkok.

(2) Ideologically, ESFA has raised the confidence and the social and political awareness of northeastern Thai peasants in their struggle with the state.

In alliance with many influential business groups, and with the effective use of its ideological and coercive apparatuses, the state is able to establish itself and gain public support overwhelmingly. In their counter-movements, peasants need to seek out their outside allies from various classes, strata, and fragments, and to disseminate information about their movement to the public. Peasants need to use every political space available to them to win the heart of the public and to gain support. Peasant movements are in a constant ideological struggle with the state in trying to bring justice and a better livelihood back to peasant lives.

As an intermediary, ESFA has raised the confidence of peasants, who, for many generations, have considered themselves of a lower status when compared with the state and other social groups. Thus, peasants often seek a patron from those in the higher social strata, for example, rich and powerful persons or factions. A feeling of subordination has sustained years of exploitation of the peasantry. Most Thai people, including northeastern Thai peasants, are familiar with this discourse and have been socialized and internalized with this idea for their entire lives (as described in chapter 3).

(3) ESFA has provided experience on the power and potentials of collective peasant actions in pursuing peasant interests, particularly with the state.

Usually, northeastern Thai peasants tend to solve their problems within the rules, regulations, and control of the state because the coercive state mechanisms prove to be very effective and powerful. Kasit, whose 1972 study sought reasons for the absence of peasant movements in Thailand, states that "...in spite of their deteriorating condition, the Thai [peasantry] has not exerted demands on the authorities, or expressed discontent. They have tended to accept whatever burden was imposed." (1972: 28)

In general, most of them try to solve their problems individually, such as working as periodic labourers. ESFA's strategy of empowering people to pursue collective actions peacefully, non-violently, and legally has proved to be another possible alternative for peasants in dealing with their socio-economic-political problems.

(4) Through direct actions in collective movements, ESFA has played an important role in enhancing political awareness of northeastern Thai peasants.

To confront problems and to set out measures to be taken by peasants themselves are an effective means for them to gain direct experience in the process of problem solving. Whenever peasants participate in collective actions, they gain more analytical views of the causes of problems of their livelihood, and of how to find possible solutions to such problems.

In addition, the political consciousness of these peasants has been raised up along with the process of participating in collective struggle movements. Their participation in collective movements has provided them a chance to learn about social knowledge at a wider level outside their communities. Mr. Bamrung Khayotha, an ESFA leader, said that "some villagers, who joined the long march of ESFA, had never protested before, but they began to realize the power of the organization (after they joined the rally)." (Bangkok Post, 18 February 1994)

6.4 Limitations of the ESFA movement

The alliances ESFA have formed are limited to a relatively few number of groups. ESFA needs to have more allies. Some of ESFA allies are politicians who are solely dependent on political parties, which in the Thai context, at present, could not represent the interests of northeastern peasants. Whenever there is a

general election or local election, some of ESFA's leaders and consultants compete among themselves to fight for votes to become representatives of provincial councils or in the parliament. This kind of problem is similar to what Migdal mentions concerning the way peasant leaders or organizers want to gain individual benefits in the process of exchange between organizers and their constituents. According to Migdal, "machine politics involves no larger goal usually than attaining local power, on the part of the organizers, and gaining individual benefits, on the part of the constituents" (1974: 218). These conflicts weaken the organization and create more problems for ESFA in seeking strong support from the public in general and from some allies in particular.

The organizational management of ESFA is weak due to many factors such as a lack of administrative personnel with experience and the ability to coordinate with the government and working with the peasant members of ESFA, the limited budget to hire staff and to cover all necessary expenditures.

Besides the internal problems, ESFA still faces some difficulties in order to legitimize its movement. Some senior government officials, politicians, and some concerned capitalist entrepreneurs view ESFA as the "trouble makers". Moreover, it is possible that some groups of state power may use the illegal way against ESFA's leaders as in the case of recent murder of Mr. Prawien Bunnak, a committee of the Esarn Small Farmers' Assembly (ESFA), during his leading protest in front of the district office in Wangsapung, Loei province.

6.5 Conclusion

This study of peasant movement under the leadership of ESFA show some new phenomena of peasant movements which might be different from those of the 1970s and 1980s. The long-term socio-economic and political changes has affected Thai peasants especially northeastern peasants to be in the disadvantaged position. The expansion of multinational conglomerates under the strong support of the Thai ruling power block have had a lot of impact on northeastern peasants, especially in placing their subsistence production under the monopolistic control of these companies. The increase of land scarcity and the resource conflicts between peasants and state power with concerned capitalist groups have brought about the occurrence of some small-scale peasant resistances in this region. The role of NGOs, in particular, have assisted the increase of political awareness of northeastern peasants. The emergence of community-based organizations and their

networks since the mid-1980s has become a strong base for northeastern peasants to organize into larger collective movement against the Thai state.

Being a relatively young organization, ESFA has yet to progress very far toward its goal in becoming an internally cohesive, effective organization. Its network at all local levels- village, sub-district, district, province-need to be monitored and strengthened.

Thai society is highly hierarchical. Peasants and unskilled workers in Thailand are placed into the category of low class people. They need an intermediary to help bridge gaps between peasants and workers, and other social groups. In Thailand, some factions of the middle class, especially groups of intellectuals and NGOs, have played this important role for the benefit of peasants and workers. However, while outsiders can help, insiders must do the job. Thus, it is much better for peasants to build up their own organizations to protect their interests. Based on this view, the birth of ESFA is important for peasants, as it is a true peasant organization. It claims to represent peasant members' interests, and acts as an intermediary between northeastern Thai peasants and other groups or classes.

Though the establishment of the NAC has received strong opposition from small farmers, there is no guarantee that the government will redirect its policies in favour of small farmers. As long as government policy is not in favour of small farmers, this issue may potentially create serious conflicts between small farmers and the state.

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