

The Assembly of the Poor

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Rationale

The Assembly of the Poor is a network of people who share the same destiny, that is being victims of over four decades of Thailand's economic and industrialization development policies. The rural agricultural sector as the backbone of the country economy was being neglected.

Aiming to be an Newly Industrialized Country is the goal set by many generations of ruling elites. But there remains an unanswered question: will such a goal benefit the majority of the people? And this has not yet mentioned the impact of cultural and environmental damages. On the social capital of the rural sector, human and natural resources have been drawn from every direction to feed the unlimited growth of the urban sector. Rivers and forests on which the survival of rural families depend have been plundered from the people by the state authority to build infrastructures. One rural community after another, has been forced to sacrifice their resources, and has been abandoned to face the subsequent hardship by themselves.

The collapse of agricultural society forces people out of their communities to cheaply sell their labor in the city. Many end up working in unsafe environments with little guarantee of their welfare. Under the unjust and corrupt bureaucratic system, calls for justice from individual groups who have been affected by the government's projects have seldom been heard.

On December 10, 1995, International Human Rights Day, a powerful people's movement was formed in Thailand. It grouped representatives from six networks: people who are affected by dam projects, land and forest conflicts, government infrastructure projects, slum problems and workers exploitation. They joined a panel discussion of international NGOs, students and networks of people who share similar problems from 10 countries to exchange their experiences in the struggle. Their common faith and hardship have brought these people to unite and be in solidarity.

Four days later, on December 14, 1995, at the Dan Kao Village in Ubon Rachatani, Khongchiam District, the Pak Mun Declaration was proclaimed, a statement from the poor to the country's leaders and general public: "The people must set up the country's development direction. The people must be the real beneficiaries of development. And the poor must participate in decision making involving development projects that will affect them."

The Activities

The world witnesses the first public appearance of the Assembly of the Poor the next day when thousands of people rallied and submitted an open letter to the Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa, who was hosting the ASEAN Summit, to urge the ASEAN governments to review their economic development policies which destroy the environment and violate human rights and to address the hardships of the underprivileged people in the society. But the prime minister simply ignored the people's call.

On January 16, 1996, representatives of the Assembly of the Poor submitted a demand to the government to solve the problems of its members in many areas. But the government failed to fulfill its promises to solve the problems.

Members of the assembly in many provinces have been heavily threatened by local authorities. Under such a pressure, the Assembly of the Poor called another gathering when Thailand hosted the first ASEM(Asian-Europe Meeting) in Bangkok. The assembly urged the 25 governments which attended the meeting to revise their cross-continental economic cooperation which caused hardship for the underprivileged around the globe. In addition, they demanded that the Thai government take action against the abuse of state power by local authorities. However, the demonstration ended with a painful feeling of pain to the villagers due to the brutal response from authorities.

"We will stage a bigger rally to pressure the government to solve our problems," a leader of the assembly declared.

On March 25, 1996 more than ten thousand people from 21 provinces representing 4 groups of problems, demonstrated their strength in a huge rally. The "Village of the Poor" was established on the street opposite to the Government House. The protesters pledged they would not go home until their demands were met.

The villagers went through a lot of hardship during the month-long rally with several rounds of negotiation between representatives of the assembly and the government. The Continuation of their non-violent struggle through the establishment of the Village of the Poor in the middle of Bangkok brought them public sympathy. This is the power of the people that the government has to accept.

On April 22, 1996, the Cabinet eventually resolved that all the four groups of problems will be solved.

However, past lessons have shown that the government promises can be broken. The assembly did not fully trust their success. "We shall return if the promises are not fulfilled," the villagers declared.

Their fears have proven to be true. Without the pressure of the rally, bureaucrats, both in Bangkok and in the provinces, appear to be ignoring the April 22 Cabinet Resolution. The villagers' problems have not reached any solution.

On the 100th day anniversary of the big rally, the assembly organized a forum to remind the government to implement the Cabinet Resolution in Thammasat University's main auditorium. The statement was submitted to the prime minister to inform him that bureaucratic system has been an obstacle to the resolution process.

The political crisis intensified leading to the dissolution of Parliament and the resignation of Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa. All the government mechanisms which were assigned to solve the problems of the poor stopped function. The assembly's resolve that there would be another big rally

in front of the Government House. "We will give the government ten more days to solve the problems," assembly advisor, Somboon Srikamdokae announces at a press conference.

On October 14, 1996, the assembly returned to the Government House to demand government agencies to follow the April 22 Cabinet Resolution. But no response was made by the interim government.

On January 25, 1997, the Village of the Poor was re-established in front of the Government House with an even larger number of people in hardship. An over one-kilometer stretch of Nakhon Pathom Road was filled up with more than 20,000 villagers.

This time the demonstration consisted of six networks of people organization: the Assembly of Dam-affected Villagers; the Assembly of Isan Small Scale Farmers; the Northern Farmers Network; the Alternative Agriculture Network; the Network of workers who are sick from work and the Slum for Democracy Organization. The objectives are to pressure the new government to concretely solve the 121 problems of the people and to provide recommendations for policy improvement and political reform which would lead to the resolution of social injustice. The recommendations include:

1. The promulgation of the Community Forest Act to support the cultural diversity of forest-based communities and to create a cooperation between government and communities in forest conservation;
2. The Slum Development Act, to guarantee housing security for slum dwellers and to prevent land encroachment;
3. The Agriculture Rights Act to support the roles of farmers in conserving and developing plant diversity; to create a bargaining power for farmers against multi-national corporations, and to protect seed variety and biological technology of the community;
4. The Rights to Information Act to support the public access to information, and create an accountability within the government system as well as an opportunity for public participation in decision making;
5. The Administration Court Act to settle disputes between the people and government based on the principle that the court must be independent from state intervention and the present juridical system;
6. The implementation of a policy on fair distribution of land through the progressive taxation system, and a value-added tax on land speculation
7. The upholding of principle of public participation, through hearings and referenda on international agreements which may affect the public such as the Biodiversity Convention, Plant Variety Protection Act, GATT and WTO, for example. Such agreements must also be approved by the Parliament.

The enduring and peaceful struggle with rational demands made the Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's government, immediately open a negotiation with the assembly's representatives. As chairman, the Premier made it clear that he would focus on solutions to problems and would amend out-dated laws which obstruct the process.

Nonetheless, government representatives in the negotiations were slow, lacked sincerity and obviously showed unwillingness to help the people. The assembly insisted on a marathon demonstration with peaceful approach.

This second big demonstration could be regarded as the longest struggle by the people, and a proof of tolerance and non-violence principles. The 99 day protest with 20,000 people has been praised by the general public as the most well-disciplined that ever happened. This is a result of a well-prepared strategy of the assembly.

Por Krua Yai, or the “big chefs” refer to core representatives from each group of the problem. Their duties are to coordinate between villagers within their own groups and the general assembly, and to represent their villagers on negotiation with the government.

Advisors are NGOs workers or village leaders who have experience in people’s movements. They play the role of supporters, assisting in negotiation, preparing documents and acting as spokespersons to the press and the urban public to develop a better understanding among the member of the public.

Ninety nine days have passed and the rally came to an end with the final round of the negotiation on the last group of problems. But here came the beginning of the new chapter in the Thai history of the grassroots people empowerment. Villagers from mountain peaks to sea shores of different races and languages, different cultures and religions have united into one, peacefully and patiently fighting until the government admitted it had implemented a wrong development policy.

Then came a change in government; the economic crisis forced Gen. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh to resign and the Democrat Party led a new coalition. Chuan Leekpai became Thailand’s 20th prime minister.

November 17, 1997, more than 100 representatives of the Assembly of the Poor started a new round of movement by requesting to meet the new prime minister. A 500-page chronological report of the problems of the poor was prepared to be presented to the premier. However, no representative from the government was willing to show up to greet the villagers. The document with a letter was put in front of the gate of the Government House.

December 30, 1997, the Cabinet appointed fourteen committee members to solve the villagers’ problems. But from then to June 1998, after some 50 meetings between the assembly and the committees, only six out of 121 problems reached solutions.

Impact of the over two-year movement on the society

- Now society is starting to accept that “human” and “forest” can co-exist. Forest-based communities are given a chance to participate in the drafting of the Community Forest Bill to support community forests.
- Many unaccountable government projects have been canceled including the Sai Buri dam project in Yala province, the Kam Saming Industrial Estate project in Ubon Rachathani province, and the Hazardous Waste Treatment project in Rayong province’s Pluak Daeng district. - Villagers who have lost their farmland and livelihood from the construction of seven dams have received reasonable compensation.
- From now on a new standard has been established that social and environmental impacts will be taken into account.
- Importantly, the assembly has successfully influenced a change in agricultural policy to include small scale farmers in the drafting of the Eighth Economic and Social Development Plan, and in running pilot projects for alternative agriculture.

- The workers who are affected by the work-hazardous will receive compensation. The government also agrees to establish an institute to protect workers' safety, health and to ensure a good working environment as well as to set up the Occupation Health and Environment Department.

- At the international level, we are allied with people's organizations in nine countries. We have established a regular communication to expand information distribution and to share experiences among groups supporting the poor.

The need to strengthen potential leadership

During the over two-year experiences of people's struggle under the alliance of the Assembly of the Poor, we have realized the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the movement by both internal and external factors. Despite a rather satisfactory level of development and success, still there is not systematic approach to train and develop the young leaders. Most of the learning process occurred during the campaign and rallies.

Opportunity for leaders to develop their potential through a systematic approach is very necessary. This will increase the leaders' capability to strengthen people's movement under the Assembly of the Poor. In the initial process of the training, there will be two seminars followed by continuous measures to create dynamism in the people's movement.

Who are the Assembly of the Poor?

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The Assembly of the Poor is a network of rural and urban villagers affected by various state and industrial development projects, especially those involving the exploitation of natural resources, which often uproots villagers from their homes and land. Also, a small but growing number of our members are workers whose health has been damaged by their exposure to hazardous conditions in unsafe factories.

The Assembly was formed in Dec, 1995 —spearheaded by villagers affected by the Pak Mun Dam— with the aim of speaking justice and peaceful resolution to empower ordinary people so they can set their own development agenda, and to make development a process which benefits the common people.

The larger network

By March 9 of this year (1997), 133 NGOs representing various fields of interest have joined in to express support for the assembly, in order to alert the public that the issues it is raising are the collective problems of Thai society and need to be resolved through the mutual cooperation of each sector in society.

Past activities of the Assembly of the Poor.

The Assembly has helped organize a wide variety of demonstrations, ranging from protests against a planned power station that would have been fuelled by lignite and garbage in Chiang Mai's Hang Dong district, to rallies against the construction of government offices on land claimed by impoverished villagers in Supan Buri's Pho Khiew village, to demand that people's agenda be discussed at international meetings, such as the Asia-Europe Summit which took place last year in

Bangkok.

Protests concerning various issues were staged in 1995 and 1996, but to no avail. In 1997, mass protests in front of Government House once again resumed, and problems raised could be divided into four main categories: dam projects and their impacts; land tenure issues; mega-projects and the urban poor; and environmental and occupational health in factories.

Why has the protest gone on so long?

Despite the harsh conditions faced by protesting villagers, the demonstration will soon enter its third month. But the villagers feel they have no choice but to continue and struggle to get their voice heard, because the progress made has not been adequate.

The Cabinet resolution passed by the Banharn government on April 22 1996 in response to a previous round of protests was a good start, but there has been no follow-up. It provides no assurance that the poor's problems will be solved in the way that was been agreed upon, all it did was "approve" the solution.

Meanwhile, some current ministers, especially Agriculture Minister Chucheep Harnswat, lack the proper knowledge and vision to tackle the complicated issues raised in the meetings, which only last two to three hours, and are not long enough to get into the details. There are many other problems related to the government's responses to our demonstration. The bureaucrats involved do not act in accordance with the Prime Minister's fine words expressing a sincere intent to address the issues. The government also distorts reality in its reports on the progress of negotiations. And finally, the Prime Minister himself seems uncommitted, and content to remain aloof despite his promises to chair meetings on all four main issues.

The Assembly's long-term goals

Our efforts to help create a society that respects human rights, social justice and environment may seem idealistic —certainly it would be unprecedented in Thai history— but we believe these goals are achievable.

On a broad level, there is an urgent need for communities to gain the rights to manage their own natural resources. They are in the best position to manage resources efficiently and for the long term since they have a distinct incentive to promote sustainable management. People should also gain the rights to participate in the government's decision-making process, particularly concerning the mega-projects that, either directly or indirectly, affect their livelihoods and quality of life.

In concrete terms, we are seeking a number of structural reforms that would help Thai society to meet these goals. We would like see the passage of a slum bill that would protect the rights of the urban poor, and a farmers rights bill that would do the same for rural villagers.

We also support a freedom of information act that would allow people (and the press) to access information that is important to their well-being, particularly in relation to development projects, which are often carried out in a non-transparent manner.

Also necessary is a new law that would create the position of an ombudsman in government agencies, to monitor the performance and honesty of government officials, and institutionalize public hearings to ensure that the public can participate in government decision-making. This should be part of a broader package of political reforms aimed at making government more accountable and attuned to the people's needs and desires.

Finally, if Thai society is ever to achieve at least a measure of equality, a genuine, progressive property tax system for landholders must be put in place.

Chronology of Events Towards Assembly of the Poor.

May 1991

Under the Anand Government:

WHO: 7 Networks of People's Organizations in the Northeastern Thailand

WHAT: took the position to oppose the Agriculture Council Bill which gave more power to the Agri-Business Companies.

RESULT: The bill proposed by the Agriculture Ministry (actually Mr. Arj Taolanond - Minister of Agriculture, and the Advisor of Charoen Phokaphand/ CP Group - a big agri-business company in Thailand) was dropped.

August 1991

Protest by burning the "Agriculture Council Bill" in front of Government House in Bangkok.

June - July 1992 Under the Anand Government:

WHO: Isarn Farmers' Assembly (IFA)

WHAT: ask government to cancel the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC)'s plan on Land Allocation Scheme for the Landless People (knowing as Kor Jor Kor) in forest reserves.

ACTION: A 80 Kilometers long march from the Nakorn Rachasima Provincial Hall to Larn Dan Yai, Pak Chong District. More than 10,000 villagers joined the long march.

RESULT: February 3, 1992, Mr. Anek Siddhiprasart, Deputy Minister of Ministry of Interior, being a full authority representative of the government, chaired the dialogue between the government and the villagers. The government agreed to abolish the LASLAP (Kor Jor Kor). The agreement was signed by Deputy Minister Anek.

February - March 1993

WHO: Villagers from Pak Mun Dam, Ubon Rachathanee Province

WHAT Oppose the construction of Pak Mun Dam

ACTION: occupied the dam construction site in Ubon Ratchathanee Province, and protested in front of Government House for 3-long years.

RESULT: March 5, 1993, Security Officials broke up the demonstration violently. Many villagers were injured. Ms. Wanida Tantivitayapitak and the villagers were sent to court.

March 1, 1993 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Tapioca Plantation Farmers' Groups in Buriram - Nakorn Ratchasima; and the Support Groups for Isarn Farmers' Network.

WHAT: launched the appeal rally to urge the government to solve the tapioca price drop both in the short-term and long term. The price was around 0.40 - 0.50 baht per kilogram only.

ACTION: 3,000 villagers rallied in front of Nong Kee District Office of Buriram Province in the Northeastern Thailand.

RESULT: Mr. Chaiyos Sasomsap, Deputy Minister of Commerce, as the chair of the dialogue, agreed to ask the factories to buy tapioca of 0.75 baht per Kilogram. But there is no long term plan. This was only for the year 1992-93.

March 10, 1993 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Isarn Pig Raisers Cooperatives and the Support Groups for Isarn Farmers' Network.

WHAT: urged the government to solve the problem of the live pig's price both in the long term and the short term.

ACTION: 4,000 villagers rallied on the Mahasarakarm - Bangkok Highway.

RESULT: Mr. Chaiyos Sasomsap, Deputy Minister of Commerce, as the chair of the dialogue, agreed that interest-free loans will be given to the cooperatives. The government also agreed to amend the Butchery Act 1992 which allowed the monopoly.

June 20-24, 1993 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Isarn Small Scale Farmers' Assembly (ISFA) *

WHAT: Cashew nut growers from 8 provinces/ 23 Districts.

ACTION: 3,500 rallied in front of Provincial Hall at Roi-Et province.

RESULT: Mr. Amnuay Patise, Deputy Finance Minister, as the chair of dialogue agreed to set up a Tripartite Committee to solve problems at the national level.

October 30, 1993 - March 23, 1994 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Mun River Basin Village Committee for the Restoration of Life and Community. Villagers from Sirindhorn Dam.

WHAT: demanding fair compensation.

ACTION: 3,000 villagers rallied in front of the Ubon Rachathanee Provincial Hall. A 100 long March from Provincial Hall to Pak Mun Dam in Khong Chiam District of Ubon Ratchathanee. It took 14 days of marching over 6 months.

RESULT: December 3, 1993, the rally of villagers at Sirindhorn Dam was broken up violently by the authorities at Lam Dome Yai Bridge near Sirindhorn Dam while they were about to join another rally at Pak Mun Dam. The 14 key-organizers including the youth leader and 2 children were arrested. Mr. Korn Dhabbarangsee, Minister of the Prime Minister Office, agreed that the government pay 30,000 baht compensation and 60,000 baht Cooperative Fund for the Pak Mun villagers. There was no improvement on the Sirindhorn Dam dialogue.

October 19 - 28, 1993 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Isarn Small Scale Farmers' Assembly (ISFA) (2nd Session)

WHAT: 9 cases from 13 provinces

ACTION: 3,000 rallied at Kuchinarai District of Kalasin Province for 10 days

RESULT: Mr. Chalerm Promlert, Deputy Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Interior (MOI), chaired the dialogue session. They agreed to appointed a Tripartite sub-committee within the Standing Committee (to solve the people's difficulties) structure (headed by Mr. Aree Wong-Areeya, the Permanent Secretary of the MOI). 3 sub-committees were established, namely: Sub-Committee on Land; Sub-Committee on Governmental Projects; and the Sub-Committee on the Devaluation of the Crops. These 3 Sub-Committees are chaired by the Deputy Permanent Secretary of MOI, Director General of the Domestic Trade of Ministry of Commerce, and Assistant Secretary of the Prime Minister respectively.

January 30 - February 16, 1994 Under the Chuan Government

Chuan Government arrested 69 students suspected by the MOI as the black hands and accused the villagers for seasonal demonstrations.

WHO: ISFA (3rd Session)

WHAT: 9 cases from 13 provinces (follow up)

ACTION: 15,000 villagers gathered together at the Irrigation Station (Zone 6) in Nakorn Rachasima and launched a 17-day long marched from Lam Ta Kong along Mitraparb (Friendship) Highway to Hin Kong (of Saraburi province).

RESULT: Mr. Nibhond Promphand, Minister of Agriculture (from Democrat Party), joined the dialogue and reached the agreement in all 9 issues. They set up the Adhoc Committee to follow up (10 each from the government, villagers and academic/ experts). The Adhoc Committee was chaired by Deputy Permanent Secretary of Agriculture Ministry. The appointment was signed by the Minister of Agriculture.

April 27 - May 4, 1994 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: Northern Farmers' Network

WHAT: urge the government to review the plan to evict the villagers from the forestry area: 13 issues on land and forest

ACTION: 2,000 villagers gathered at Sala Ang Kaew (Grand Hall at Chiang Mai University in Northern Thailand) and launched the 7-day long march from Chiang Mai along the Paholyothin Super Highway to Lampoon province.

RESULT: Mr. Prachuab Chaiyasarn, Minister of Agriculture, chaired the dialogue at Lampoon Provincial Hall. The dialogue resulted in appointing a Committee to Resolve the Forest and Land Problems which was chaired by Minister Prachuab himself.

January 24 - February 4, 1995 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: ISFA (4th Session)

WHAT: 9 (previous) cases plus another 46 new issues

ACTION: 12,000 villagers gathered at Choke Chai Crossroad and Klong (Canal) Phai (in Nakorn Ratchasima Province) and then launched a 12-day long march up to Khao Bandai Ma (Horse Ladder Mountain)

RESULT: Mr. Prachuab Chaiyasarn, Minister of Agriculture, chaired the dialogue. The government agreed by signing the agreement with the villagers and set up a joint committee between the government and the ISFA.

March 1 - 27, 1995 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: ISFA - Loey Province Chapter (Zone 4)

WHAT: demand to close down 3 quarry factories in Pha Noi Sub District, Wangsapung District, Loey Province.

ACTION: 3,000 villagers gathered at the explosion site of the quarries (belong to Surat Quarry Company) for 27 days.

RESULT: Mr. Prachuab Chaiyasarn, Minister of Agriculture, ordered the Deputy Provincial Governor of Loey Province to submit a report on illegal quarries outside the concession zone.

April 16 - 21, 1995 Under the Chuan Government

WHO: ISFA - Loey Province Chapter (Zone 4)

WHAT: demand for the closing down of 3 quarry factories in Loey province.

ACTION: 1,500 villagers rallied in front of Government House in Bangkok for 5 days.

RESULT: MOI (in panic) withdrew the concessions for the 3 quarries because of another scandal over the Land Reform Scheme (Sor Por Kor 4-01). Along the way back, Mr. Prawien, a prominent teacher and leader of ISFA, was threatened by the supporters of the quarry companies. They still continued to dynamite quarries at the sites.

May 15 - 19, 1995 Under the Chuan's Government

WHO: ISFA (Session 4/1)

WHAT: Follow up gathering of the "February 3, 1995 Agreement"

ACTION: 1,000 villagers gathered in front of the Government House for 5 days.

RESULT: Unfortunately Chuan government dissolved the Parliament to avoid a "no confidence vote" on the scandalous "Sor Por Kor 4-01".

July 13 - 15, 1995 [7 days after the General Election]

WHO: ISFA

WHAT: Urge the government to take action on the killing of Prawien Boon Nak, an ISFA leader. Demand the government to arrest the agitator of the killing and bring justice to them.

ACTION: 12,000 villagers gathered at Prawien's grave site in Wangsapung District of Loey Province.

RESULT: the action had to halt due to the death of the respected Princess Mother Srinakarind

October 4 - 11, 1995 Under the Banharn Government

WHO: ISFA (session 4/2)

WHAT: Follow up of the "February 3, 1995 Agreement" and demand to solve the problems urgently.

ACTION: 3,000 villagers launched an 8-day long march from Klong Phai to Pak Chong (Nakorn Ratchasima Province).

RESULT: The government appointed a new committee. The representatives of ISFA met Prime Minister Banharn at Baan Pissanuloke (Sub Office of PM) to urgently resolve the problems. As the result, the government appointed Mr. Montree Pongpanich, Deputy Prime Minister, to be the Chair of the Committee; and Mr. Suvit Khunkitti, the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, to be the key Coordinator in resolving these problems.

P.S.

* Posted of the International River Network (IRN) website. Documented by: Prasittiporn Kan-Onsri, Coordinator, Friends of the People (FOP). Translated by: Nantiya Tangwisutijit and Boonthan T. Verawongse.