

Who has rights to development?

The impact of the dominant development model on local communities: the case of former sea nomads in Thailand

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There exist several discourses on “development” and some are conflicting with one another. Serious questions need to be raised about the kind of development that neglects human rights and people as dignified beings. By placing the emphasis on economic growth and prosperity, “development” often widens gaps between national wealth and collective well-being of indigenous groups and other marginalized groups.

Sombath’s work has shed light on the integrative whole of human and nature, thus cultural respect and local context is key to his work pursuit. He puts the strong emphasis on people’s participation as it would also provide well-rounded information from various perspectives, contributes to transparency, and really leads to sustainable and healthy development. The case of *Chao Lay* or sea people/sea nomads in Thailand truly reflects the issue of rights to development, and how the dominant development model exerts much negative effect on local communities.

Development and marginalization of the *Chao Lay*

Chao Lay is the term referring to three ethnic groups of sea nomads—Moken, Moklen, and Urak Lawoi— who were among the first peoples in the coastal areas and islands of the Andaman Sea. These areas have been their home, foraging grounds, sacred places and dying beds even before the establishment of Thailand nation-state. Practically, the entire Andaman Sea coast and islands used to be the home of nomadic and semi-nomadic *Chao Lay* populations. In the earlier period, their livelihoods were based on subsistence, and later when outsiders gradually moved in or tapped into their communities, trading became a supplementary occupation.



Left: Nomadic Moken on their *kabang* boat, and right: Moken temporary shelters on an island during the rainy season.

After the period of subsistence and trade, larger scale extraction of resources began, from manual and local small-scale extraction of tin toward more technology-based and

large-scale methods. The landscape and seascape has been changed and huge sand piles together with large ponds serve as a vivid trace of these tin-mining activities from that era. More importantly, some Chao Lay communities were relocated to make way for this tin-mining and other forms of resource extraction.

When tin-mining activities declined due to decreasing natural stock, and the replacement of tin cans by other substance and synthetics, new kind of “development” comes in the form of coconut, then para-rubber and later oil palm plantations. This kind of “industrialized” agriculture also opened up more opportunities for land grabbing. While most Chao Lay remained fishers and gatherers, some were pulled into wage labor and worked for certain entrepreneurs.

Later, with the beautiful coastal scenery and sandy beaches on many islands along the Andaman coast have become popular tourism spots. Domestic tourism started to develop with local hotels and amenities, then international tourism came in later with even more elaborate luxuries. Beach and seaside land was sought after. While such land was earlier either common property, or private one usually given to ne’er-do-well sons who were agriculturally unproductive.

Chao Lay communities were slowly and gradually relocated, removed and driven away for hotels, resorts and commercial districts. Several international coastal “world-class” destinations figuratively have no trace and face of *Chao Lay*. Today, while these areas retain the *Chao Lay* words like “Phi Phi Islands” (or *Bee-bree* in Urak Lawoi language), the Urak Lawoi community on Phi Phi Don Island has been squeezed into a small ghetto, stripped off any dignity as the very first inhabitants.

With the economic propelled by tourism development, real estate for vacationers and tourism, and related businesses operators flourishes. S when one searches for certain local names in the internet, only maps and information on properties for sale come up. There is almost no information of *Chao Lay* history and community. So even in this information society, there is obviously an imbalance of information availability.

After such development in coastal and island areas, new economic opportunities brought an influx of in-migration, new-comers with market-oriented ways of thinking grasped opportunities in natural resource extraction and investment. Andaman Sea coastal provinces like Phuket has quickly developed a large number of infrastructure and services for mainstream tourism and business.

In 2017 with population of around 400,000, Phuket received over 13 million tourists, who brought more than 377 million baht in revenues to Thailand. Phuket’s Gross Provincial Product (GPP) is usually the highest in southern region of Thailand and among top 10 provinces of the whole nation. This is an illusory success reflected in certain numerical indicators, but it is far removed from the reality of people’s collective well-being, especially the earlier inhabitants of the island.

Phuket is now facing the problems of resource degradation, traffic jams, lack of fresh water during the dry season, accidents and crimes, etc. While top hotels and resorts provide expensive, exclusive and lavish services, certain areas become ghettos of

squatters' shacks with dense and degraded conditions. These conditions do not fit in the definition of sustainable development.



Tourists and speed boat in front of an Urak Lawoi community in Phuket

Cultural rights movement for and of the *Chao Lay*

The *Chao Lay* became better known to the Thai society after the 2004 tsunami. Staff of relief and development organizations got to know these people, and many were impressed by their everyday contentment and sufficiency. Rather than seeking fortune and grasping for more economic opportunities, the *Chao Lay* prefer to continue living in the community, and, if they have a free choice, would remain fishers and gatherers. Yet marine resource degradation and the lack of access to land resources push them into becoming low-skilled laborers.

Although the *Chao Lay* children are sent to local schools, most do not continue to higher education and some even failing along the way. Young *Chao Lay* like outdoor lives and are very energetic and observant in the natural environment. When put inside square classrooms with walls, they find it difficult to focus and are less attentive when they are frequently compared with their non-*Chao Lay* peers in mixed ethnic schools. With this “educational modernization” and eagerness toward “education 4.0”, traditional marine and maritime knowledge has been slowly forgotten as these become less relevant in the present day competitive economy. It is thus almost hopeless to look at the young to help revitalize their cultures and traditions.

Since 2010, *Chao Lay* leaders in the communities affected by “development projects”, along with university researchers and staff of non-government organizations became more organized. With political will from the then Minister of Culture, the cabinet resolution on “Revitalization of *Chao Lay* Culture” was passed in June 2010; and two months later another cabinet resolution on the *Karen* groups was passed. This facilitates the effort *Chao Lay* self-organization and networking with indigenous and ethnic groups in Thailand.



A Facebook page run by *Chao Lay* leaders to reflect situations in their communities

These two cabinet resolutions stated that “special cultural zones” should be set up to protect marginalized population with vulnerable cultures like the *Chao Lay* and the *Karen*. This also aims to make sure that development in the areas does not jeopardize community and cultural rights. Nevertheless, this concept and realization of cultural zone received only minor attention from central and local government offices. Five *Chao Lay* communities and four *Karen* communities declared themselves as part of the special cultural zone, but with little recognition and support from outside, they could not do much in defense of their vulnerable cultures and sufficiency life ways.

Chao Lay thus created their own network and joined forces with other relevant movements: in Krabi Province, the people who questioned sustainability of coal-powered energy proposed a path of development called “Krabi Go Green”; and in Phang-nga province, communities seeing the value in being in rather quiet and lush areas, proposed a development scheme based on “Phang-nga Happy Place”. In addition, leaders of *Chao Lay* Network started to work with more marginalized groups like the Mani’q negrito communities in southern Thailand. This kind of development from below incubated a sense of community and based on people’s participation, trust, and care.

Returning to the ideas and discourses on development, “Sustainable Development Goals” or SDGs has become another global buzzword for development targets, yet the issue of incompatibility among goals has posed a big challenge for the actual implementation, as agencies and actors see that their scheme and actions fall into one or more aspects of sustainable development. It is thus crucial to recognize that buzzwords of development come and go, but Sombath’s work has shown the importance of how it should be built on genuine development. We may call it “integrative development” or “considerate development”—it is one that place the emphasis on nature, humanity and community, with human rights also being the core of all these. In honor of Sombath, this vision of integrative development or considerate development lives on and it will stand the test of time.

References

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