

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



1.1 Background to the Study

The contemporary capitalist world is unequally developed and there are economic gaps at all different levels, regionally or locally. In this consumerist system capital accumulation and economic growth are central to the system. It is inevitable that the stratification of the world system occurs, since economic growth requires the concentration of productive resources in some particular area of the system, which is called the “centre”. The constitution of the centre, where capital, technology, management skills, labor and natural resources are concentrated and accumulated, necessitates the transformation of other regions, from where these resources are drawn. These regions are called the “periphery”, since these areas are often turned into scarcely populated and ecologically devastated areas where community life has been destroyed (Nishikawa 2004, p 89).

Natural resources are often seen as one of the most important assets that contribute to economic growth. The Thai-Karen people have inhabited the rural mountainous areas in the northwestern Thailand, the areas where rich forests and natural resources of Thailand are situated. The villagers who live close to rich forest often fail to transform that richness into their own economic well-being. Although the forest resources are becoming rare and their economic value is rising, people living close to the forest remain poor (Sato, 1997).

The existing economic development of Thailand shall now be reviewed for the rural and peripheral areas of the country where most of the hill tribe and Karen people live. There are development programs and projects such as cash crops production, which have substituted substance agricultural farming in the rural areas. The driving force of the rapid economic growth in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s was the state propagated the diversification of cash cropping for the world market in combination with the extension of agricultural areas on behalf of forest

areas, and in the early 1980s the forest cover was officially estimated at less than one third of the total land area and deforestation was increasingly perceived as a problem (Buergin 2002, pp 3-4).

These development programs have also included the extraction of natural resources in the rural areas, and the building of parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the areas where Karen people and other hill tribes have lived for years. Buergin (2002) stated that, about 3,000 people are living in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary and they are almost exclusively ethnic Pwo Karen, born predominantly in Thailand, most of them within the sanctuary. The first written historic references to their residence in Thung Yai may be found in Thai chronicles of the 18th century. When Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary was declared a National World Heritage Site in 1991, the Karen were only perceived as a disruptive factor (Buergin 2002, pp 7-20)

The natural resources extraction project of Padaeng mining industry has caused many local Thai and Karen farmers in Mae Sot district to abandon their farms since 2004. It was a result of the chemical spillovers of the mining flowing to the farms that are now prohibited to grow rice and other vegetables as consuming crops from these farms will cause chemical related disease (see picture of the affected farms in the attachment B). The Troubled Company Reporter–Asia Pacific Newsletter *TCRAP* (2000) posted an article of the Bangkok Post (2000), that Padaeng Industry PLC, the country's sole zinc-smelter operator, applied for the new concession in 1998 to mine zinc ore on a new tract adjacent to its existing ones in Mae Sot, Tak province. As the new tract is located in a grade A watershed, the ministry was concerned that the approval may trigger protests by conservationists. The new mine, covering 300 rai, would enable Padaeng to produce 138,000 tons of zinc ore and earn 6.455 billion baht, with the government collecting 161 million baht in royalties. A senior official of the Department of Mineral Resources said the department had approved Padaeng's request for the concession, primarily for technical and economic reasons, and had submitted it to Industry Ministry for further approval. Furthermore, the department's approval was also based on economic reasons as demand for zinc was rising and the company's production would help reduce the country's trade deficit,

he said. The company was also seeking new strategic partners to boost its liquidity and expand its business (Bangkok Post 27-Jan-2000).

Notwithstanding such development projects, the economic growth of many local Thai-Karen communities has not yet achieved its overall development. Despite the fact that throughout Thailand's periphery many remote rural areas remain underdeveloped with a lack of proper infrastructure and social welfare such as health care and education facilities, the Government continues to develop the country's centre - Bangkok and its vicinity - to become the hub of regional networks of South East Asia countries. This the Government does by locating most facilities, infrastructures, means of business, economic, social, cultural and political activities within the foresaid centre. Imbalanced development has aggravated disparity between the centre and the periphery.

During Thailand's mainstream economic growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, populations from the peripheries, such as Karen people and other Hill Tribe communities, have benefited moderately from economic prosperity, as have other high income groups of Thai society: the rich, the employed, urban populations and skilled workers. Although Thailand has achieved sustained economic growth for more than two decades there still remain inequalities in economic opportunities among the country's different groups of people.

The Office of United Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC) and United Nations Country Team in Thailand (UNCT) (2002) made the following report in its Development Assistance Framework for Thailand for 2002-2006 – UNDAF. Although Thailand has achieved an average growth of eight percent annually in the early 1990s - which allowed for the substantial reduction in poverty incidence from 32.6 percent in 1988 to 11.4 percent in 1996 - the growth has caused serious disparities that still underline Thai society. The main conclusion of the United Nations' Common Country Assessment (CCA) was that such disparities undermine prospects for sustainable human development. These disparities exist not only between income classes such as the rich and the poor but also between geographic areas such as rural and urban; Bangkok and the provinces (Office of the United

Nations Resident Coordinator (UNRC), United Nations Country Team in Thailand (UNCT) 2002, p 8).

People can appraise development both positively and negatively. It depends on where they are from, the position they hold, or the discipline they belong to. Different views can be seen from different groups of people. It is also recognized that the aspects of poor people' economy and social welfare cannot be neglected or excluded from the overall development discourse of the country. The participation of Thai-Karen people in the sustainable economic development of the country can be a small slice of the whole cake, but the contribution of their workforces for the country's overall sustainable development - which can either be encouraging or delaying the overall development of the country, can be of great importance. Their participation will encourage national economic development if their workforces are skilled and supportive to the overall economic composition. It will hinder the progress of development if their workforces are unproductive to the functions of economic activities.

It is worthwhile to take into account in the mainstream discourse of development the economic development aspects of the people from the peripheries, which are also supportive forces for the sustainable development of the country. Accordingly the economic aspects of Thai-Karen people shall be studied, and the analysis of these issues will highlight the economic development opportunities of Thai-Karen people. It will also be of importance to find out how the participation of their workforces can help assist the overall economic development of the country. Furthermore their reinforcement and appreciation of the management of natural resources and environmental conservation can also contribute to the development of a country.

1.2 Objective of the Study

In this study the aspects of economy and society of Thai-Karen people from the five border districts of Tak province will be studied. In regard to the fundamental means that endorse and promote economic development, such as education and employment opportunities, these will form the core issues of the analysis. It is also hoped that the outcomes of the study will shed some light on explanations that are applicable to the economic development of the Thai-Karen people in particular and Thailand in general.

The core objective of the study is to analyze the inter-relationship between economic development, education and working opportunities of the Thai-Karen people in the five border districts of Tak province in north-western Thailand. The study is going to explore three issues that are listed below, and to try to find out how they can be of support and relevance to the economic development of Thai-Karen people.

The three areas under discussion are;

1. Opportunities for formal education in public and private schools,
2. Informal education, training and apprenticeships and
3. Working opportunities in government agencies, private business and enterprises.

The core idea of this research is to find out how economic development can be achieved in the Thai-Karen communities in the selected research location. The research location is the Thai-Karen communities living in the border districts of Tak province on Thai-Burma border. Tak province is one of the provinces that have a large population of Thai-Karen people. They inhabit the mountainous and remote areas of Tak province. Agriculture is the main source of income generation of Thai-Karen people and rice growing is the main source of household consumption. It is interesting to note that although these areas have opportunities for market economy, cross-border trading and services, and are attractive places for tourism, the economic activities of Thai-Karen that involve such business opportunities are not growing as

they should. However there are economic and social potentials for development in the areas, e.g. employment opportunities, trading and services.

Development can be illustrated as improvement, progress and growth. According to the UNDP development means enlargement of people's choices. In time of globalization and free trade the economic competition among organizations or businesses is seen as very advanced and in some cases seems uncontrollable. Nowadays skills and knowledge are vital for every business to be able to stay competitive. They are also the focal point of employment and business opportunities. Therefore with regards to the economic improvement of Thai-Karen people, opportunity for formal and informal education and working opportunities of Thai-Karen people are taken as the core issues of this study. By exploring these issues and their inter-relationship it is hoped that the possible solutions to improve the current economic situation of Thai-Karen people can be discovered and promoted.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study explores the current situation of Thai-Karen people, in terms of their social and economic conditions, as well as their ethnic background and settings in the milieu of the five border districts of Tak province in northwestern Thailand. The research covers the Thai-Karen communities in the border districts of Tak province, namely Tha Song Yang, Mae Ramat, Mae Sot, Phop Phra and Umphang districts. First hand information and data collected from the field research are from individual Thai-Karen with different professions in these areas.

Based on qualitative research, interviews were done with Thai-Karen from the research sites. They include students, undergraduates, community leaders, farmers, villagers and missionaries working in the Thai-Karen communities. In-depth interviews were also done with Thai-Karen who are working in government agencies, such as chairperson of Tambon (Sub-District) Administration Organization (TAO), village headmen (Phu Yai Baan) and Sub-District chief (Kamnan). Some Thai-Karen interviewees were also staff of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as TOPS (Taiwan Overseas Peace Service), CT (Consortium Thailand), ZOA (Dutch

NGO), COERR (Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees), which are working on education, health, sanitation, and the social welfare of Burmese migrant workers, refugees, and Thai-Karen communities in the border districts.

1.4 Basic Concepts and Hypothesis

The basic concept of development in this study is that economic development of the Thai-Karen people can be appraised in terms of opportunities towards education and works. The current economic situation of Thai-Karen people is still at subsistence level, i.e. substance agricultural farming. Because of constraints such as getting land for agricultural farming and shifting cultivation is no longer allowed by the government (as it causes deforestation and destroys natural resources and biodiversities), the Thai-Karen farmers must find alternative solutions for their income generation.

Thailand is known to be one of the most successful countries in macro-economic development, yet least successful in its management of natural resources (Sato 1997). Some reasons are that farmers who have lost their land for various reasons migrate not only to the city but also to the remaining forest reserves where the property demarcation is still not yet fixed and chances to lawfully obtain land use certificates still remain. Demands for land and forest resources are rising, whereas the number of areas that are protected is also increasing. It clearly shows that successful conservation at one place may trigger deforestation in another area, and there is a greater need for a systematic approach to conservation. (Sato 1997)

Since the Thai-Karen villagers are moving from place to place among the forests in the rural areas - which is a result of the type of agriculture they have chosen as rotational cultivation - they are faced with difficulties such as land encroachment for agriculture purpose, and land tenure for permanent cultivation. The population is growing whereas available agricultural lands for farming are limited for villagers in these areas.

Many small and remote villages do not have appropriate education and health facilities. After finishing primary education which is also the highest level of education in their villages, Thai-Karen students have to go to nearby towns or cities to continue their studies. Many families can not afford to send their children to towns, meaning that there is only a small percentage of students with high school education. Reasons would be that some families might not have enough resources to support the schooling of their children or some families do not want to lose their children to education as they will no longer be available for household labor. Maniratanavongisri (2004) explained that most Thai-Karen live as a nuclear family and traditionally every person in a family must work to contribute to the family's economic wellbeing. Many unskilled villagers approach towns and cities for low paid jobs. Remittance of their wages to their families is very infrequent. Therefore one of the possible choices for them to improve their economic status is that they shall pursue education that they can use for employment in different economic sectors.

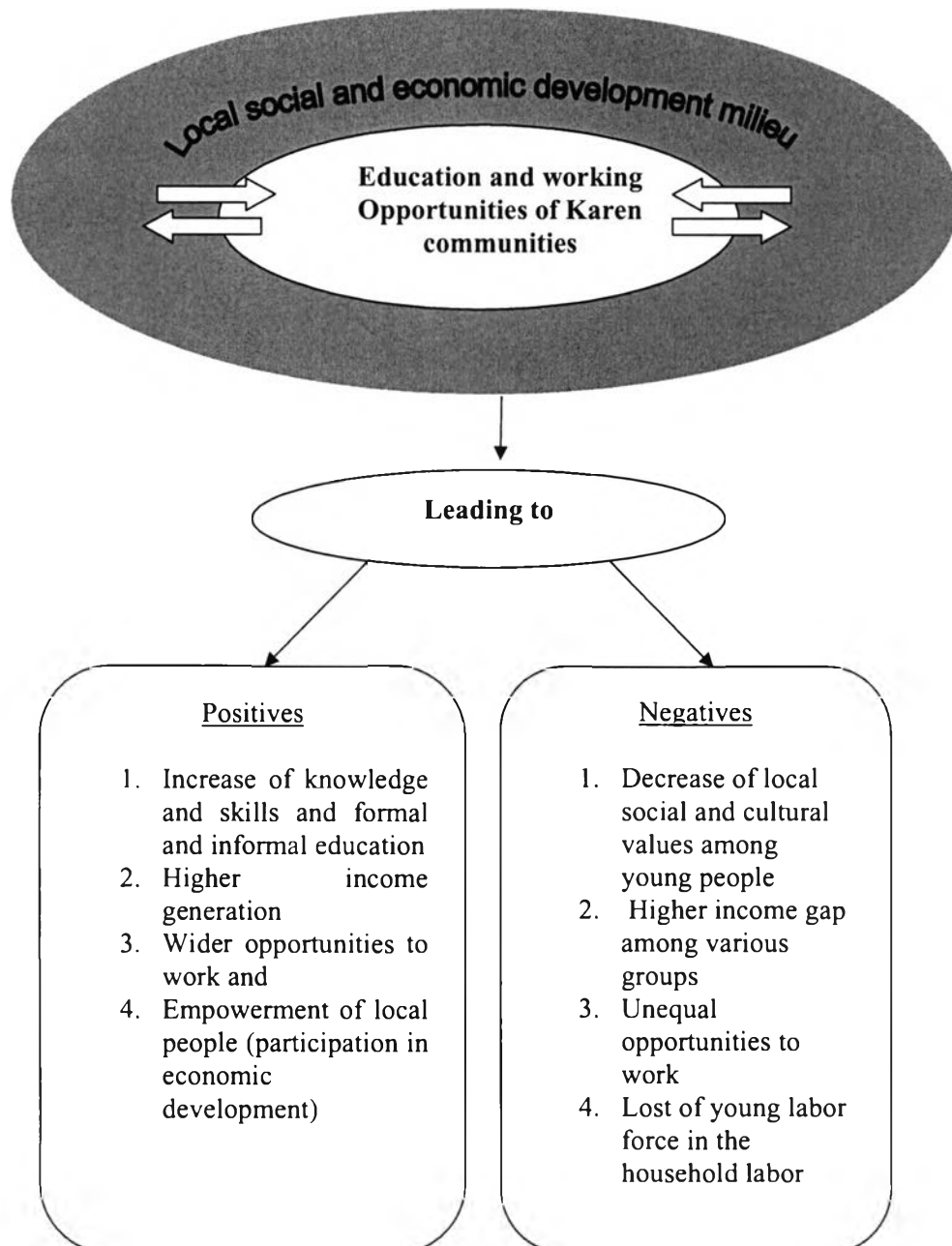
Therefore some practicable conceptual statements can be listed as follows;

1. Formal education leads to better opportunities in work and level of participation in development of the Thai-Karen people.
2. Informal education provides better opportunities in work and level of participation in development alternatives for the Thai-Karen people.
3. Economic development through education enlarges people's opportunities to work both in government agencies and private business and enterprise.

The present social and economic conditions of the five border districts in Tak province has not yet been fully developed to the extent that growth can be generated in terms of work opportunities, income, knowledge and skills of the labor force. Particularly, the Thai-Karen laborers are lacking of the means and qualifications that are necessary to activate the desired level of economic development. As stated above most of Thai-Karen work force are still economically subsistent with agriculture as the main income. Seasonally, as unskilled labor, the young Thai-Karen laborers have to find jobs in Bangkok, other provincial cities and nearby towns for extra income. Education - in this respect skills and knowledge in economic and business sectors - has to be provided as a means for economic

achievement for the young people. The economics development has to be planned in order to absorb those with better education qualification, which in turn will finally generate economic growth and development in this area.

Diagram No 1: Diagram of Basic Conceptual Framework



Operational definitions

1. Education includes both formal and informal, i.e. schools, apprenticeships, occupational trainings;
2. Working opportunities include self-employment and trade and business enterprise, non-governmental organizations and government agencies;