

Internal Displacement and the Ethnic Highlanders and in northern Thailand

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General Discussion

I was shocked getting to know the internal displacement situations and the plights of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) around the world from a Press release on "The global internal displacement crisis continued to worsen in 2007"¹ and a report of "INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: Global Overview of Trends and Development in 2007"². There was also a discussion on situations in southern Thailand in the report. I think the situations in other parts of Thailand are missing. Then on behalf of the project staffs and the displaced ethnic highlanders, I would like to share some particular lessons and experiences learnt from northern Thailand during 2004-2007³. This small piece of work would be a complement of internal displacement situation in Thailand and raise up the public awareness of such situation hopefully.

What is Internal Displacement?

In short, internal displacement refers to "persons who are forced to leave their home areas or have to flee because of conflict, human rights violations, and other natural or

¹ See more detail at [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/890516A5EDC23EFEC125742E003311D9/$file/IDMC_Global_Overview_PR_2008.pdf)
(httpInfoFiles)/890516A5EDC23EFEC125742E003311D9/\$file/IDMC_Global_Overview_PR_2008.pdf

² See more detail at [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/BD8316FAB5984142C125742E0033180B/$file/IDMC_Internal_Displacement_Global_Overview_2007.pdf)
(httpInfoFiles)/BD8316FAB5984142C125742E0033180B/\$file/IDMC_Internal_Displacement_Global_Overview_2007.pdf

³ Contributed from working with "A Comparative Study through Enhancing Process on Rights to Life and Rights to Self Determination for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) among Risky Area under the Thai Government Policy" the cooperation between the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, the Rajabhat Chiangrai University, the Chiangrai College of Agriculture and Technology and the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions

human-made disasters". The Internally Displaced persons (IDPs) are different from refugees because they have not crossed an internationally recognized state border.

Displaced Ethnic Highlanders in northern Thailand

In Northern Thailand, the displaced ethnic highlanders are consequences from the combination of coercive and economic factors. These ethnic highlanders seem to be the target of repressive government policies on economic developments, state security and natural resources. The reproductions of involuntary relocations reflect the lacking of participation of the ethnic highlanders throughout the processes.

A table and some figures shown in this article reveal a particular situation of internal displacement in Northern Thailand.

Table 1 Lessons and experiences learnt from Displaced Ethnic Highlanders' villages in northern Thailand

Province	Village	Ethnic Groups	year	No. of displaced		Reasons of the relocations
				population	household	
Lampang	Huai Wad	Lahu	2003	367	90	Headwater areas/ drugs / Declaration of Tham Pha Thai National Park
Chiangmai	Pong Hi	Lahu	1975-1976	404	84	Area restriction / development t/ drugs
Nan	Sunchareun	Mien	1981/1985/ 1989	607	99	State security / restriction on opium cultivation / better land for settlement
Lampang	Wang Mai	Mien, Lesu, Lua	1993	880	160	Headwater areas/ National Park Area/ Development
Chiangrai	Ja Lae	Lahu, Akha	1999	310	60	Headwater areas
Chiangmai	Huai Hean	Lahu	1998,2001, 2005	N.A.	58	The declaration of Mae Fang National Park
Chiangmai	Hua Nam	Lesu	2001	140	25	Headwater areas /Forest reservation
Chimagrai	Than Tong	Hmong	1990	1528	88	Headwater areas
Chiangmai	Huai Ja Karn	Lesu	1994/1995	261	56	Wildlife Sanctuaries area/ problems on land and water

Source: 2006 field survey and focus group

Figure 1 Settlements and locations of some displaced ethnic highlanders' villages in northern Thailand



Hua Nam Village



Huai Wad Village



Ja Lae Village



Huai Hean Village



Than Tong Village



Pong Hi Village



Huai Ja Kam Village



Huai Nam Ma Village

Life after the Relocations

Usually with similar situations, the displaced ethnic highlanders have been suffering from highly inadequate living situations at their new homes. As the relocation sites are not well prepared, the common problems are usually poor soil condition, lacking of water and inadequate of basic infrastructures.

In their homeland, the ethnic highlanders plant upland rice to supplement food consumption of the household. They integrate upland rice with other food crops during the rainy season planting. The yield of upland rice usually varies, ranging from less than 100 kg / rai to 400 kg / rai. Actually, 300 kg / rai, is considered to be a good yield.

Unfortunately, the average upland rice yield at Huai Ja Kan in 2006 was at 250 kg/rai. This obviously reflects that it is not enough for household consumption. It is worse when some Lesu at Huai Ja Karn Village have not cultivated in their land even once for over 13 years due to the soil erosion.

In some cases the displaced ethnic highlanders face the difficulties to integrate with local people at the relocation sties. For instance the displaced Lesu from Lung Muang Village had a serious conflict on land and water utilization with the local How at Kak Lesu village after their relocation in 1994. Then they had to relocate at Huia Ja Kan in 1995 and experienced the similar conflict with the local Lahu.

Figure 2 Poor soil condition and drought in some displaced ethnic highlanders' villages in Northern Thailand



Huai Wad Stream in dry season



Poor soil condition at Huai Wad



Cultivation land at Huai Ja Kan

Figure 3 The lacking of water in some displaced ethnic highlanders' villages in Northern Thailand



Water from this dam is supposed to use for cultivation at Huai Ja Kan but unfortunately the dam is lower than the level of cultivation area.



The unused water pipe from the dam to cultivation



Underground water at Huia Ja Kan and Huai Wad is not potable due to high bacteria, sulfate and iron.

The Changing Way of Life and their identities

The displaced ethnic highlanders have to adjust themselves with new surroundings. So new patterns of living that they have to learn. No more shifting cultivation and using of their local wisdom in utilizing natural resources under the limitation of land use and inadequate natural resources.

So the Lahu at Huai Wad have to earn by cutting and delivering bamboos. Since they get 4 baht per a bamboo stem, they work harder to earn as said "the more they cut and the more they earn". Some then sigh "*Her- See- La -Yo*" which means "*I am so tired that I almost die*". They also have to go further each year for bamboo cutting since the bamboos nearby the village has been totally cut down.

In most displaced villages, the work-force age go to work in towns and cities. Most of them are labors and some engage in sex trades. Once, the situation of HIV's was at crisis in Wang Mai and Pong Hi which reflected by some orphans in the villages nowadays. As there are only the elderly and young children in the displaced villages, a chain of warm and happy relationships in their families has been cut off.

Since the relocations do not recognize their social and cultural aspects, the places of their beliefs and traditional ceremonies are left behind. The displaced ethnic highlanders then lose their identities.

How to cope up with the Internal Displacement?

National Responsibility

It is clearly indicated in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement¹ that "...the primary responsibility for protecting and assisting IDPs rests with their national authorities..." The 30 principles underscore rights of the IDPs and their special needs and the government obligations

¹ See The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: Bilingual Edition at <http://geocities.com/muaykae/guidingprinciples.pdf>

toward the IDPs. Then the Handbook for applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement help the guiding more practical in field workings². However the best way to cope up with internal displacement to prevent from the displacement as states in the Handbook that “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”.

Humanitarian Assistancess

It may be too difficult for the displaced ethnic highlanders to cope up with the problem by themselves. They are quite vulnerable and dependent at the early stage after the relocations. As mentioned in the guiding principles 24-27 on humanitarian assistance. Both the national authorities and the civil society groups could play major roles to cope up with the problems existing in the displaced villages. However it is also sensitive to provide helps as the “giving” concept may lessen the senses of self reliance too. The concept of working together throughout the processes should be more relevant to make the displaced being self reliance.

Sharing Lessons and experiences learnt

According to lessons and experiences learnt from working with the displaced ethnic highlanders in Northern Thailand, some critical issues then would like to share.

- 🌸 In order to promote human rights approach programs in the displaced villages, to fulfill their basic needs should be the first priority.
- 🌸 Prejudice towards the ethnic highlanders is a crucial barrier to address the problems of displaced ethnic highlanders
- 🌸 The considerations of social capital of the ethnic highlanders and their needs in programs inventing in the displaced villages could lead to the sustainable ones
- 🌸 It need to be reviewed seriously that “Is the relocation of the ethnic highlanders from their homeland the best way to solve the problems of state security, natural resources management , and drug eradication?”

² See Handbook for applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement: English version available at <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/resources/HEnglish.pdf>. The Thai version is available at <http://geocities.com/muaykae/handbook.pdf>