

# The Dilemma of Development in Northeast Thailand

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Thailand is in a process of raising its economic, social and political standards. Since World War II various Administrations have attempted to develop the country, raise living standards, and improve welfare levels for the Thai population through improvement of agriculture, industrialization and social welfare measures. Thailand aims to follow the path of the advanced and developed countries of Europe and North America.

However, early development measures in Thailand concentrated in and around Bangkok and certain big provincial seats. The population in the area which received direct benefits of early development activities amounted to merely 20% of all population in Thailand. The rest of Thailand -- the majority of 80% -- had no part in development, nor received any benefit from these activities. Not until about ten years ago did the Thai Government begin to realize the gravity of ignoring the countryside and decide to take necessary measures to bring progress and development into rural areas. Northeast Thailand, being poorest and least developed, received the greatest attention from the Government.

The Bangkok Government now concentrated its development efforts in the Northeast for a different reason. The Thai Government is extremely worried that the Communists will create disturbances through greater degrees of agitation, subversion and guerrilla warfare as they have been doing in Laos and South Vietnam. It cannot ignore the possibility that a "National Liberation War" could spread into Northeast Thailand since the Northeast possesses geographical proximity to Laos and there are about 30,000 Vietnamese refugees in the region. The Communist might capitalize on the economic poorness of the region and the lack of attention giving it by previous Thai Administrations, in order to create and stir alienation and dissatisfaction from the Thai National Government on the part of Northerners. And when the Thai Communists established a Thai Patriot Front in Peking under the support of the Communist Chinese Government to carry out a guerrilla movement in Thailand, the Thai Government was convinced that the enemy of Thailand would concentrate on the neglected Northerners. Development to counter Communist subversion in the Northeast, therefore, begin in earnest.

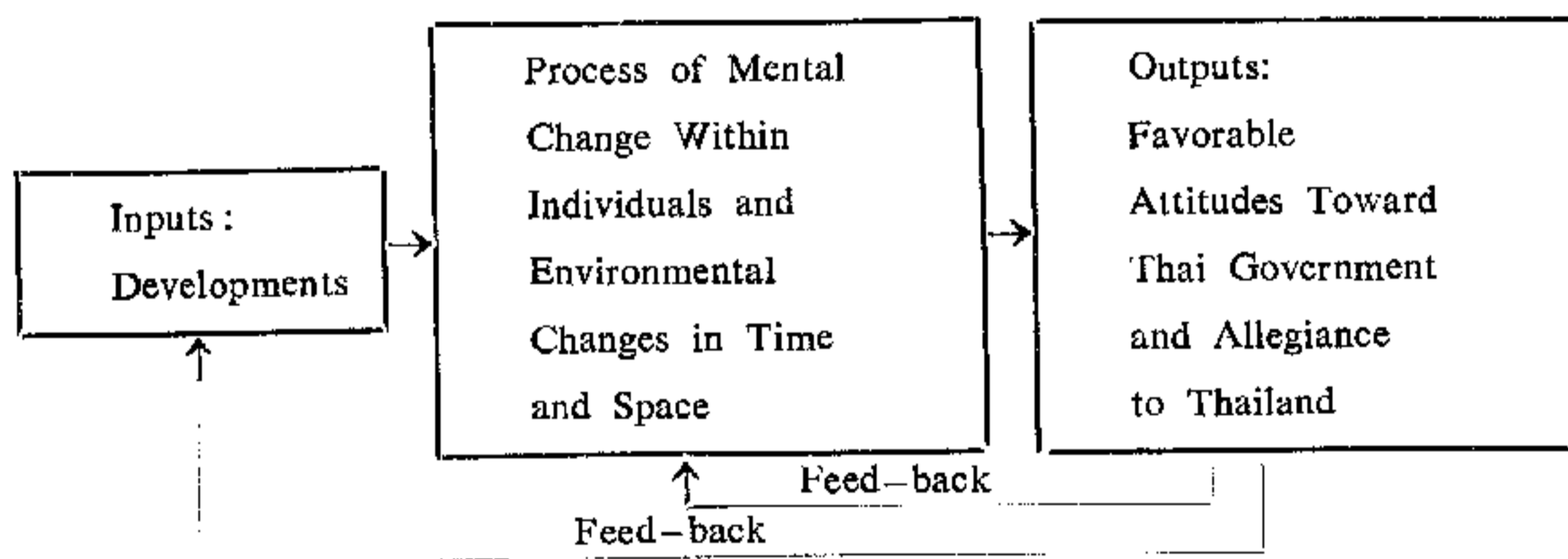
This paper is not designed to question the strategy of Communist suppression in Thailand. However, a comment should be made in regard to the concentration of counter-insurgency and development efforts only in the Northeast. Recent incidents of subversion and armed clash in many other parts of Thailand have pointed

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out serious short-comings of this fire-fighting policy. Perhaps, other regions — not only the Northeast — also need attention and preventive measures before condition deteriorates.

On the surface, the rationale for the development of the Northeast is two-fold: first, there is the need for social and economic development of the Northeast as such; and secondly, prevention and suppression of Communist subversive activities in the Northeast. If we carefully consider the priority of these objectives in about twenty projects presently being carried out in the Northeast<sup>1</sup> — Community Development, Mobile Development Units, Accelerated Rural Development, Home Guards, Village Security Officers, Volunteer Defence Corps, Special Suppression Units, Border Patrol Police's Civic Actions, etc. — there is no doubt that Royal Thai Government gives priority to prevention and suppression of subversive activities and of guerrilla movement in the Northeast. In other words, development *per se* plays a secondary role to the prevention and suppression of Communism. Development, however desirable it may be, serves only as preventive measures against Communists' objectives in Thailand.

The Thai Government does use various measures in attempting to strengthen the loyalty of its population in the Northeast and in immunizing their attitudes towards Communist agitation and propaganda. The most important measure for winning people's heart and minds and for boosting morale among the Northeasterners has been developed. The Royal Thai Government apparently hopes that through development, the people will be wooed from dissatisfaction with or passive attitudes toward the Thai Government and their attitudes changed toward loyalty and support of Royal Thai Government. In a sense, the Government and supporters of civic actions and of development take it for granted that development inputs would influence people's attitudes in the following manner:



Favorable attitudes toward economic and social development.

<sup>1</sup>Ranyong Tochiinda, *et. al.*, "Administrations in Time of Emergency: A Case Study on Counter-Insurgency Administration in Thailand," *Thai Journal of Development Administration*, 8, 1: 50-1, January 1968. (In Thai).

The transformation of development input into favorable attitudes as with any social changes cannot be done overnight. This transformation must pass through stages in which individual and environmental changes proceed to affect mental, attitudinal and behavioral changes among the population. These stages consume times and contain variables may be either few or many, either tangible or intangible, and either social, economic and/or political in nature. Certain variables may seem unfavorable initially but have over-all effects which will be favorable for such transformation. And occasionally a very small but intensely adverse variable can outweigh many favorable variables; or at the same time, a very small but intensely favorable variable can overcome many negative variables.

Development inputs should therefore bring about environmental changes before affecting any change on attitudes. There should be a transformation of tangibles into intangibles during the stages of change. In reality we can see the tangible aspects of change, but we are able only to assume that some changes are going on in the intangible sphere.

Changes will be most effective when they are closely related to the felt needs of persons involved. If the Northeasterners feel that they have no stake in such development or that their needs are not satisfied by on-going development activities, it is fairly obvious that a process of perceptual, attitudinal and behavioral change will not be put in action, due to inadequate changes affecting felt needs of individuals. In short, development projects which result in change on *individuals* are more desirable than developments which affect only environmental changes. *The emphasis must be the human-being and forces which clearly affect him.*

Development in the Northeast is clearly changing the physical environment; but in many instances it does not immediately relate to changes in the way of life of the people. We question whether development measures do in fact respond to villagers' needs. They are designed with uncoordinated ad-hoc administrative convenience in mind. For example, Accelerated Rural Development proponents emphasize roads; Health Officers think that concrete wells and privies are the most important projects of development, etc. These projects do not always satisfy the needs of the people, because each locality has its own particular needs.

Frequently, the villagers do not use water from concrete wells for consumption. They do not like the taste of water from the concrete wells and they continue to consume water from the unsanitary earthened wells. Nor do the villagers find the opportunity to use the privies because they must go to their rice paddy or take their buffaloes to the field early in the morning. And they do not have time to run back home and use the privy in the daytime. And if they must walk several kilometers to fetch water for domestic consumption, it sounds reasonable that they refuse to use that water for flooding toilets.

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This does not mean that all villages do not need concrete wells or privies; these examples serve only to illustrate that some villages may need something before others, for example, road before privies, wells before community hall, and road, health center before wells, and so on. Therefore, it seems that administrative convenience which does not consider people's different needs in various localities results in an inflexibility of responses to needs of the villagers. *This inflexibilities defeats the purposes of development and does not facilitate or advance the cause of prevention and suppression of Communist in the Northeast.*

Moreover, development activities tend to be concentrated in some particular villages, to the point of ignoring the surrounding villages. Presuming that development activities could somehow change attitudes of the villagers and win their hearts and minds for the Thai Government, only villagers in these selected villages would have had favorable attitudes toward government. At the same time, the surrounding villages became more dissatisfied with the Government because they considered this "favoritism" policy a discrimination against them. This relative deprivation has adverse psychological effects on the people in the surrounding villages more than when no village is receiving anything from the Government at all.<sup>2</sup>

These examples clearly indicate that environmental changes do not necessarily evolve into the intangible realm. Development inputs which have no impact on individuals therefore can hardly win the allegiance of the people.

Even development measures which affect changes on individuals can be obstructed from proceeding into intangible sphere. Variables that obstruct a transformation of development inputs into favorable attitudes roam in the background. These adverse variables may be psychological, social, economic and/or political in nature. Psychologically, the Northeasterners tend to consider development efforts as the Government's direct responsibility and seem to be apathetic toward such inputs. This psychological position does not cast favorable light on the transformation process.

Economic and political variables do play some important roles in facilitating or obstructing the process of transformation. However, the people do not in general hold the Government responsible for their economic hardship. If there is draught or flood, they blame it on the Providence; if there is illness in the family, they blame the evil spirit. But they somehow expect the Government to intervene and redress their troubles. Nor do they actively involve in political process and behave in a politically conscious manner. Most northeasterners merely observe rules of

<sup>2</sup> See Samuel Stauffer, et. al, *The American Soldiers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949), for greater detail on theory of relative deprivation.]

"non-participatory democracy."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the devious means of silencing political opposition from the Northeast did arouse and create resentment among most educated and politically conscious Northerners. This practice must be avoided in the future, if we consider political integration of the Northeast into Thailand important for the future of Thailand.

Thus far, social variables have been the most destructive factors for development efforts. The attitudes and behaviors of Government officials towards the villagers and in implementing development projects mean a great deal to the villagers. Although the villagers realize that the officials are superior to them and always treat them as subordinates, they nevertheless expect to be treated as human being. And since the people regard these local Government officials as representatives of the Royal Thai Government, they hold the Government responsible for the performance and behaviors of local officials. Local officials' attitudes, behaviors and performances therefore always reflect either favorably or unfavorably on the Thai Government.

The villagers in the Northeast in many instances do not receive dignified or humane treatment from officials. Most officials still behave as "King's servants," not "public servants."<sup>4</sup> These behavior and the attitudes behind it are the remnant of feudalism and divine right monarchy concept which had been accepted by the Thais for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, Thai officials are also dictated by another influence, paternalism. It was an attitude and practice of ancient Thai states which considered the population as children and the rulers as fathers. Paternalism dominated Thai political philosophy until the early period of Ayudhaya, when it was suddenly replaced by divine-right monarchy concept. Nevertheless, divine-right monarchy and a rejuvenated feudalism had not been able to supplant paternalism entirely, especially in the village level. Even in higher official circles at present, paternalism has been reincarnated; but it has been modified into patronizing attitudes.

Beside feudalism and the divine-right monarchy concept which place Government official in a superior level over the villagers, prestige and power accrued to official positions also contribute to a separation of officials from the villagers. Functioning strictly according to laws which are formulated in Bangkok and according

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, one of the best analyses of Northeastern Thais' political awareness (or unawareness) has been written by Stephen B. Young in his monograph, *The Northeastern Village: A Non-Participatory Democracy*, Bangkok, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> James N. Mosel, "Thai administrative Behavior," in William J. Siffin, ed., *Toward the Comparative Study of Public Administration*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Department of Government, Indiana University, 1957), p. 323.

<sup>5</sup> For greater detail on divine-right monarchy and feudalism, see Mosel, *op. cit.*, and William J. Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy: Institutional Change and Development*, (Hawaii: East-West Center Press, 1967).

to officials' judgments, the officials have not been able to make themselves, and Government, understandable to or popular among the villagers. And if the villagers believe that they receive partial, unjust and insulting treatments from the officials, it is highly probable that the villagers are very susceptible to Communist propaganda. And all evidences thus far seem to indicate that the Communists do indeed exploit this particular aspect of official-villager relationship in their propaganda. Social variables are the Achilles' heel of the Royal Thai Government.

We can conclude that two most formidable obstacles in winning Northerners's hearts and minds have been: (1) psychological and physical distance in which the villagers feel that development projects do not satisfy their needs, and (2) social variables especially with reference to the relationship between officials and villagers. The former variable can be easily managed, through searching for real villagers' needs and through flexible programs of development. Social variables, on the other hand, cannot be easily controlled and changed. The most that the Government can do to immediately ameliorate this serious social condition is to dispatch and support better trained and qualified officials who do not have feudalistic mentality in the Northeast. Northeastern and other peripheral provinces should not remain as the "Siberia of Thailand" for the officials out-of-favor.

Development in the Northeast for security reasons seems to depend on the attitudes and behaviors of Government officials. With feudalistic attitudes and superiority complex among officials, development is self-defeating if it brings *more* arrogant officials to make *more* contacts with villagers. Thailand shall win in psychological warfare and/or guerrilla warfare over the Communists only when the villagers feel that the officials are for them and on their side, with or without development projects. Independence of Thailand remains in the hands of Government officials and depends strongly on their attitudes and behaviors in dealing with villagers.

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