

Negotiating Livelihoods in an Urban Hinterland: A Study of Fishing Households at Thung Sang Lake, Khon Kaen Province

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Abstract. This article is based on the authors' original research aiming to explain how urbanization affects livelihoods of rural people in the hinterland, and how these people adapt and negotiate for survival and well-being. Qualitative research was conducted in a village located in the immediate hinterland of Khon Kaen City in the Northeast region of Thailand. Semi-structured, unstructured and group interviews, as well as observations were used to collect data, which were then displayed, interpreted and verified before tentative and final conclusions were made. The research found that urban expansion and a public lake development project have resulted in the marginalization of poor landless fishing families. The marginalization process had two facets, namely the non-participative inclusion of fishing households into the development process and the exclusion of fishing households by imposing the legitimacy of the development project and state law on the people. This process denied the people's access to and control over the natural resources of the lake, thereby creating more poverty. The study of fishing households' livelihood strategies found that these households were involved in social and economic negotiations and adaptation. The article summarizes five important livelihood strategies which contributed to the people's survival and well-being, and suggests ways to mitigate negative impacts and enhance positive impacts of development projects.

Keywords: livelihood strategies, urban hinterland, rural-urban interaction

1. Introduction

Urbanization, the rapid and massive growth of and migration to cities, produces positive and negative impacts on built-up urban areas as well as on their hinterlands. Urban hinterland can be defined as the landscape interface between town and country, a transition area between urban land uses and agricultural or rural areas (Briant et al., 1982). The documented impact of urban expansion on rural hinterland includes, for example, changes in ecological balance; loss of agricultural land; land speculation; changes in farming practices, livelihoods and life-styles; and pollution (Brockerhoff, 2000). Such impacts are expected to increase, particularly in the hinterland area of small and medium-sized cities. While a number of research projects on urbanization have focussed on its environmental, economic and social consequences, studies on the responses of households and communities in urban hinterlands to city and town expansion are very limited (Van den Berg et al., 2003). The research on which this article is based is intended to fill this gap.

This article focuses on the negotiations and livelihood changes made by hinterland people in response to urban expansion and an urban development project which turned a livelihood lake into a leisure place for urban people of Khon Kaen, a regional centre of the northeast region of Thailand. This article explains how this development project further marginalized poor households whose livelihoods are dependant on the lake and how these households negotiated and constructed livelihood strategies for survival after their access to the lake was denied. Fourteen fishing households residing in a village near the lake were purposely selected and interviewed in-depth in 2007 and 2011. Other key informants included village formal and informal leaders, fish traders, and staff of Khon Kaen Municipality and the Khon Kaen Fishery Office. Field data

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were organized, displayed, interpreted and verified before tentative and final conclusions were made. The following section will present the findings of this research.

2. The Lake Development Project and the Marginalization Process

2.1. The Lake Development Project

Thung Sang Lake was the largest water resource of Khon Kaen City, covering an area of 4 square kilometers (988.4 acres). Because local people have turned some areas of the lake into farmland, settlements and fish ponds, Khon Kaen Municipality data in 2006 indicated that the lake area was reduced to 2.7 square kilometers (667.18 acres), with a water volume of 3,248,640 cubic metres. In 1950s Khon Kaen was deliberately selected by the Thai government as the growth center of the country's poorest region, the Northeast. Basic infrastructure such as road networks, a multi-purpose dam for irrigation and electricity, and a regional university were constructed to promote a local green revolution and industrial development. Though the pace of development was slow at the beginning, such infrastructural development began to pay off during the last twenty years. Khon Kaen is now among the 10 largest cities of Thailand, and is currently the center of the Northeast region for public administration, education and business. In 2010 Khon Kaen Municipality (the city center and the immediate peri-urban fringe) had a population of 113,754 (Khon Kaen Municipality, 2011).

Thung Sang Lake was one of the scenes of negotiations between local government agencies and the people during the development process of Khon Kaen. This public water resource was originally used for agriculture, mainly rice farming and fishing, by nearby villagers. The growth of Khon Kaen attracted new migrant families from poorer rural areas far away. Most of these migrant families were landless. They settled down in the area near the lake. Some were employed in town, while others became full-time fishers. They built fishing rafts with liftable fishing nets on the lake, following the traditional local fishing practices. However, in 1975-1976, the Khon Kaen Fisheries Office forbade all fishers to use fishing rafts to catch fish in some parts of the lake by announcing that it was a fishery conservation zone. Before that, in 1970 a new city drainage system was constructed and waste water from the eastern part of the city was drained into the lake. Though the lake was linked to a natural waterway which flows to the Chi River, a tributary of the Mekong River, fishers were worried and complained about pollution. A city water treatment project of the city was initiated in 1982 and completed in 1989. Part of the lake (0.69 square kilometers or 68.7 acres) was set aside for the construction of the water treatment plant and a number of stabilization ponds. During the construction period, all fishing activities were forbidden.

As the city grew, the way of life in Khon Kaen City became more and more urbanized. Thung Sang Lake, the largest water resource area, located on the northeast fringe of the city, was an important target of development to improve the city landscape and quality of life of urban people. In 1996, Khon Kaen Municipality started a comprehensive lake and park development project. A deserted public park located next to the lake was enlarged and developed as a "healthy garden" with jogging tracks, an open-air gym, and a green park. Part of the lake was drained and dug deeper to turn the shallow lake and some swampy areas into a deep lake; some of the soil that was dug out was used to fill the land and enlarge the park area. During 2002-2006 more funds were allocated to develop the entire lake.

2.2. Marginalization Process

The development of the lake has had great impacts on the livelihoods of local people, especially poor families whose major source of livelihood was fishing; yet these people were not consulted or properly informed of the development plan. In 1996, when the lake was drained, the people were not consulted or paid for their lost livelihoods or for their damaged fishing rafts. They made complaints to the municipality, but did not get appropriate responses.

The development of Thung Sang Lake was the major factor affecting the marginalization of fishing households. The marginalization process had two main facets:

- **The non-participative inclusion of fishing households into the development project** - People who lived in the hinterland near the lake had to accept the lake development project for the sake of city development and advancement. As discussed above, the lake that was once an important natural

resource base for local livelihoods was transformed in the urbanization and city development process first into a drainage area, next into a polluted water treatment area, and finally into a place for leisure activities of city people, at the local people's expense. Affected households were at times invited to join the meetings organized by the Khon Kaen Municipality; however it appears that their disagreements and complaints were not taken seriously. Their participation in the meetings was only meant to legitimize the local government's decisions.

- **The exclusion of fishing households by imposing the legitimacy of the development project and state law upon the people** - In the process of lake development, laws and regulation were used to silence local people. By officially promoting a fish conservation area, water treatment area, and lake development plan, traditional fishing activities for the livelihoods of local people were treated as "illegal" and "disorderly". People had to stop fishing in certain areas forbidden by the state. Eventually, the forbidden areas covered the entire lake.

3. Livelihood Negotiation of Fishing Households

Loss of control over and access to natural capital drove local people, particularly the households that had fishing as their main occupation, to adopt various strategies for survival. The major livelihood strategies were:

- Negotiation for more access to the natural resources – Denied of their access to the lake, fishing households tried many ways to continue fishing, as it was their main livelihood. These included sneaking into the stabilization ponds and fishing there; and protesting and petitioning when their equipment and tools were seized or damaged by force. When the lake was fully developed, some families restarted fishing behind the guards' back, starting from using small fishing equipment. After the rules became less restrictive, many of them started to fish by using fishing rafts again. It is important to note that these fishing families failed to organize themselves to ask for their rights to use the lake. This was because they thought that they were just migrants, and also because they accepted the development discourse that gave legitimate rights to the state to manage the lake for the sake of development and prosperity.
- Diversification of household economic activities – After access to the lake was denied, affected families diversified their economic activities to meet their consumption needs. The activities included local and urban wage work (in construction, home gardens, groceries, food shops and restaurants), small entrepreneurial activities (small construction contracting, packaging for retail shops, charcoal production, and solid waste collection and classification), and agricultural intensification. Some migrated to other places where they could resume their fishing occupation.
- Value adding to fishing – Fishing households tried to add value to the smaller amount of fish caught from the lake. They cut and processed the fish by using household labor, skills and local knowledge to gain more income. They also went to the city market to sell their products directly to the consumers.
- Maintaining and strengthening the family's role in pursuing household strategies through intensive use of family labor and flexible division of labor – In order to effectively diversify their economic activities to take up new opportunities, families played important roles. Poor people had to plan for survival and progress as a family unit, not just as individuals. They tried to make the best use of individual human resources within the family, which vary in terms of age, gender, physical strength, educational attainment and skills. For example, old people might be assigned to take care of small children at home, while working on fish cutting and preserving, to allow the stronger work force within the family to get employment in the city. Income earned was used to sustain the whole family's well-being.
- Using social capital in place of limited natural capital – Social capital is the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging gaps between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Dekker and Uslaner 2001). Social networks of poor people in the study area were based on kinship, friendship community, inter-community and cross-country relations, fostered by communal traditions, ceremonies, travel and migration. With the help of contacts within such social networks, poor people

were able to learn new skills to start new entrepreneurial activities, find new jobs, get access to credit, and know where to migrate.

4. Conclusions

In this article, the authors have attempted to explain how urbanization and city development planning affect the livelihoods of rural people in the hinterland. In the case of Khon Kaen City in the Northeast region of Thailand, urban expansion and a public lake development project have resulted in the marginalization of a poor group in the community, namely the landless fishing families. The marginalization process had two facets, namely the non-participative inclusion of fishing households into the development project and the exclusion of fishing households by imposing the legitimacy of the development project and state law on the people. This process has put limits on the people's access to and control over the natural resources of the lake, thereby creating more poverty. The study of fishing households' livelihood strategies found that these households were involved in social and economic negotiation and adaptation, which both contributed to their survival and in some cases improved well-being. These outcomes demonstrate the strength of the local people.

It was observed that the non-participative development project created negative impacts on the livelihoods of the people in the hinterland, and that very limited measures were taken to minimize these impacts. The authors therefore suggest that any development plans and projects which aim to manage common resources should first and foremost understand the way of life and livelihoods of the people and communities who are dependant on those resources. Without profound understanding of these factors, adverse impacts could occur that reduce the benefits of the plans and projects. Potentially affected people and communities should be supported to become involved in the planning process, particularly in the social and environmental impact assessment, in order to mitigate the adverse effects and to enhance positive effects. In the case of Thung Sang Lake where the project has already been implemented, local government should consider allocating a certain area of the lake to be managed by local groups or communities and supporting these groups in the management of lake (water and other natural resources), so that hinterland communities and people could have a share in the benefits of the lake resources.

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