

Transnational Livelihoods of the Returning Thai Diaspora in Thai Society

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Abstract. The Thai Diaspora in Burma is categorized as a ‘victim diaspora’ that was attached to the territory after the new Thai-Burma boundary demarcation between Britain and Siam was settled in 1868. Consequently, these groups of people live in territories which belong to the Burmese nation-state instead of Thailand, but they believe that they lived in ‘original’ Thai territory and that they are Thai citizens. Some of these people moved to Thailand in the 1980s but were not granted Thai citizenship. Their status has become that of the Returning Thai Diaspora because they lack the rights and powers to access livelihood assets. Consequently, they have made ‘transnational livelihoods’ one of their livelihood strategies. This paper suggests that ‘political capital’ should be considered as an important capital/asset in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. This inclusion should encourage policy makers to be more aware of ‘power’ and ‘rights’ as critical issues of people in vulnerable contexts such as that of the Returning Thai Diaspora.

Keywords: Thai Diaspora, transnational livelihoods, livelihood strategies, political capital

1. Introduction

Members of the Thai Diaspora in Burma have lived in Myeik-Taninthayi territory on the Malay Peninsula near the Thai provinces of Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Ranong long before the boundary between Britain and Siam was settled in 1868. Although the Thai Diaspora lives in territories that now belong to the Burmese nation-state according to the map of the modern world, they believe that they live in ‘original’ Thai territory and that they are Thai citizens. Since the 1970s, the military government of Burma has been exerting more control over these communities. This situation resulted in serial migrations of the Thai Diaspora from Burma to Thailand in the 1980s. However, this Thai Diaspora has not been granted Thai citizenship and therefore has not obtained any such rights. Their status has become that of the Returning Thai Diaspora who are ‘stateless Thais’ in Thai society (Senakham 2007). Although they identify themselves as Thai who speak and write the Thai language, maintain Thai cultural practices, etc., the Thai government treats them as ‘the other’ or ‘persons who do not have Thai nationality’. Thus, they do not have legal rights to assets or the means of basic livelihoods. For example, they have no legal rights to own land, housing, vehicles, etc; they are not allowed to travel beyond provincial boundaries, and their children cannot study at higher educational levels in Thailand. The Returning Thai Diaspora does not have any kind of political rights. Without Thai identity cards, they cannot be hired legally; and being illegal workers, they are paid low wages and often are not even paid. However, the Returning Thai Diaspora has created livelihood strategies for surviving in Thai society, and has made their voices heard many times.

Although ‘Diaspora Studies’ has been growing rapidly as an academic field of study, research on the Returning Thai Diaspora is relatively limited. The issues of and gaps in the knowledge about these people can be summarized as follows:

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- **Policy issues:** The Returning Thai Diaspora comprises part of the stateless people in Thailand. Until now, the Thai government has not implemented any clear policies regarding them, probably because the studies relating to them are relatively limited, as mentioned above.
- **Methodologies:** Inquiries on diasporas are focused on ‘deterritorialization critiques’; therefore, the majority of research attempts to match the concept of ‘nation-state’ with other diaspora issues (Adamson and Demetriou 2007). This paper analyzes the Returning Thai Diaspora from the perspectives of livelihoods and human rights, which view them as humans, not as ‘the other’.
- **Sociological theories/concepts:** Linking the concepts of ‘Diasporas’ and ‘Livelihoods’ may create more understanding of ‘Transnationalism’. Currently, academics have focused on ‘transnational livelihoods’, because globalization has caused people to have multi-livelihood places and links across the boundaries of cities, provinces or countries (Rigg and Salamanca 2009). The Returning Thai Diaspora has formulated ‘transnational livelihoods’ as one of their livelihood strategies because of limited access to livelihood assets/capitals in Thai society.

The objective of this study is to examine choice and livelihood ‘capital’ that the Returning Thai Diaspora uses to create livelihood strategies. The conceptual framework is to analyze this group of people, who are viewed as ‘the other’ by the government’s pragmatic approach, which classifies them as ‘agencies’ and represses them. Consequently, these ‘agencies’ counter and negotiate ‘structures’ with history, social formation, Thai consciousnesses and identity, and gather into networks to restore their Thai nationality. The Returning Thai Diaspora has formulated livelihood strategies for surviving without citizen’s rights. Their choices for achieving livelihood outcomes may be different from those of Thai citizens, leading to theoretical/conceptual arguments on the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach.

2. Who comprise the Diaspora?

The term ‘Diaspora’ first appeared in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), expressing views of events that divided the Jewish people between those in the homeland and those in exile (Evans 2009). In the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* published in 1937, ‘Diaspora’ referred to a very specific case of the Jews who were exiled from the Holy Land and their dispersal throughout several parts of the world. The word connoted uprooting, legal disabilities, oppression, and painful adaptation to the hostland. Meanwhile, the people comprising this diaspora developed a set of institutions, social patterns, and symbols, including language, religion, values, social norms, and continued hope of returning to the homeland. In this context, the Jewish diaspora who were forced to leave their homeland were distinguished as a prototype or ‘classical diaspora paradigm’ (Safran, 2005).

With the emergence of globalization, the term ‘diaspora’ has been reconceptualized to encompass phenomena of increased international population mobility, such as emigration to developed countries, the telecommunication and transportation revolution, and the development of a cosmopolitan global culture. In this way the frontiers among ethnic minorities, refugee flows, migrations, and diaspora emerged (Popescu, 2006). There are some arguments concerning other aspects of diaspora, such as defining diaspora as ‘*ethnic communities divided by state frontiers*’ (Brubaker 2005) and rethinking of basic assumptions about ‘displacement’ and understanding the formative processes of new diasporas. An example is the dramatic case of the ‘unintended’ diaspora of approximately 25 million post-Soviet Russians outside Russia’s borders that occurred overnight in 1991 (Voutira 2006).

Therefore, the Thai Diaspora (in Burma) may be categorized as a ‘victim diaspora’, based on the arguments of Brubaker (2005) and Voutira (2006) and the Returning Thai Diaspora (in Thailand) may also be categorized as a ‘victim diaspora’, based on the definition of Safran (2005), but the latter is a diaspora in their homeland not in the hostland.

3. The Returning Thai Diaspora’s Livelihood Strategies

The livelihoods approach is useful for studying poverty issues and there are ways to explore the actors’ perceptions of the environment, of themselves, and of the dynamics and processes they are involved in. The term ‘livelihood’ will help us understand the complexity of current problems of poverty and development (Kaag et al. 2004). The ‘capabilities approach’ developed by Amartya Sen has influenced livelihood

conceptualization. The most widely quoted definition of livelihood is that given by Carney (1998), based on Chambers and Conway (1992):

“A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with a recovery from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural recourse base”.

The livelihood concept was developed through the contributions of scholars from various disciplines. One of these was made with policy circles to develop analytical frameworks that allow the livelihood situation of a target group to be captured, followed by contributions on livelihood perspectives with case studies on the livelihood strategies of a particular group of people in a particular environment. The Department for International Development (DFID) is the main representative of this approach.

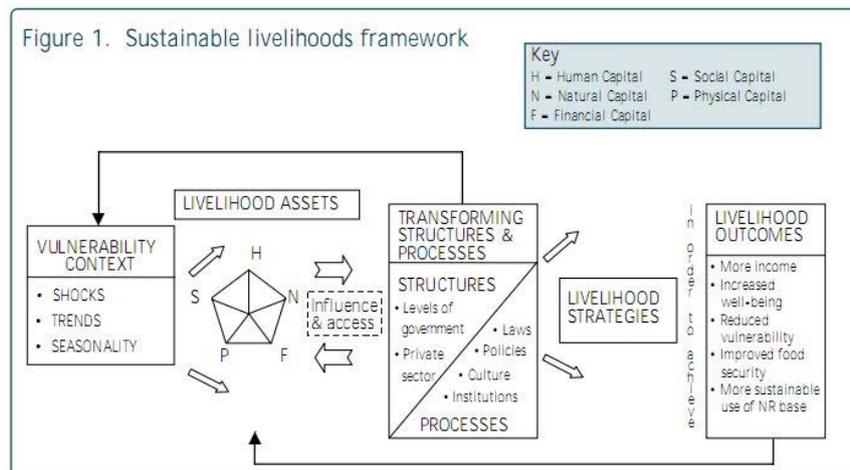


Fig. 1: Sustainable Livelihoods Framework: SLF (DFID, 1999)

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework or (SLF). The main factors that affect poor people’s livelihoods are listed below (DFID, 1999):

- **Vulnerability Context:** It frames the external environment in which people exist. The factors that make up the vulnerability context are important because they have a direct impact upon people’s asset status and the options that are open to them in pursuit of beneficial livelihood outcomes.
- **Livelihood Assets:** It seeks to gain an understanding of people’s strengths (assets or capital endowments) and how they try to convert these into positive livelihood outcomes. SLF identifies five core asset categories or types of capital upon which livelihoods are built: human, social, natural physical and financial capital.
- **Transforming Structures and Processes:** They contain the various types and levels of structure and process, such as the institutions, organizations, policies and legislation that shape people’s livelihoods.
- **Livelihood Strategies:** It seeks to promote choices, opportunities and diversity. The term is used to denote the range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals.
- **Livelihood Outcomes:** The achievements or outputs of Livelihood Strategies help to understand output, motivate people and help them prioritize and respond to new opportunities, and assess support activities.

The livelihood strategies of the Returning Thai Diaspora may be different from those of Thai citizens because the former have limited access to livelihood assets/capitals and they lack citizen rights. SLF identifies five capital assets which people can build and draw upon: human, natural, financial, social and physical. ‘Sets of activities’ and ‘choices’ that the Returning Thai Diaspora use for coping and surviving are:

- **Human Capital:** ‘Household members’ in the older generation may not be different from other members. But the younger people are guided to marry Thai citizens in order to gain citizenship for their children and seek those who can be the livelihood asset owners, etc. ‘Occupations’ follow the same pattern; they are not allowed to travel beyond provincial boundaries either for work or study.

Consequently, most of the people work as local labourers in construction, fishing, or in factories, and some are merchants at local markets. In this sense *'labour'* is their key human capital. *'Health'* - before 2010, they could get health services from the Thai government but had to pay in full for treatment. Since the beginning of 2011, they have received health support from the government but only in provincial boundary areas. This support results from their efforts to make their voices heard.

- **Natural Capital:** *'Access to land'* - they cannot be legal land owners. Consequently, some engage in agriculture on small plots rented from landlords and some go farming across the border in Burma. *'Natural resources'* include the fishery resources from canals and the sea. The majority of natural capital brought from Burma includes wood (tree stumps), orchids, bamboo shoots, etc.
- **Social Capital:** *'Networks'* are considered the key factor upon which the Returning Thai Diaspora draws in pursuit of their livelihood objectives. These include networks and relations of connectedness that increase people's trust and ability to work together and link to other capital assets which can assist in increasing well-being. They also include memberships in local associations and networks such as savings groups and the Restoring Thai Nationality Problem Solving Network, etc. However, social capital is limited because of the inability to travel beyond provincial boundaries
- **Financial Capital:** For sources of finance and credit, the Returning Thai Diaspora accesses financial capital through social capital. They organize credit and savings schemes by themselves because they cannot partake of bank services. *Saving groups* are the channels and core activities that encourage participation, collaboration and connection of Returning Thai Diaspora communities
- **Physical Capital:** The Returning Thai Diaspora cannot own livelihood assets which require certificates, such as a house, car, motorbike, etc. Again, social capital is the key factor for overcoming this limitation. They trust and let their kin, relative, or son/daughter-in-law, or even a neighbour who has citizenship be the owner of these assets. They can use *infrastructure and facilities* together with Thai people in the communities as physical capital for achieving their livelihood outcomes.

Choices to formulate livelihood strategies of the Returning Thai Diaspora above are constructed from processes that include multiple approaches to respond to contrasting needs. Following SLF explains the 'vulnerability context' which frames the external environment in which people exist. It connotes fixing people in space or only in localities which made it difficult for the Returning Thai Diaspora to capture 'transnational livelihoods'. The 'transnational livelihoods' were deeply influenced by the sense of identity of the returnees themselves. Livelihoods extended linkage across international borders and were reflected in the identities of the returnees and a deep sense of attachment to 'home'. Transnational livelihoods involve activities at the workplace and are based on moving across countries without immigration restrictions and transferring goods and capitals from one place to another (Thomas-Hope 2002). Thus, a transnational livelihood is one of the livelihood strategies of the Returning Thai Diaspora. This strategy includes living across borders and transnational workplaces, fleeing wars both from Thailand to Burma and Burma to Thailand, and transnational capitals and resources for making a living. Consequently, 'risk' is the main factor that the Returning Diaspora has to consider in formulating choices either in Thailand or Burma. The risks include, for example, engaging in dangerous work on marine fishing boats, working without pay (being cheated of wages or sometimes being prevented from taking purchased wood across the border) or encountering warfare between the Burmese military against ethnic minorities in borderlands, etc.

4. Critical Problems of the Returning Thai Diaspora

SLF may be not focused on 'power and rights' as capital assets of people for making a living. There are debates over whether to include 'political capital' in SLF, because it is hard to distinguish political capital from social capital. However, we can argue that social capital relates to horizontal claims on kin, associations, and social networks of different kinds, while political capital is much more concerned with power, differentiation and vertical claims that households can make on the state or those more powerful than they. Not to include 'political capital' also weakens SLF as an approach to development and effectiveness of interventions to meet 'sustainable livelihood' objectives (Baumann 2000). Correspondently, the arguments which the Returning Thai Diaspora makes to the government are related to their nationality and citizen rights. Thus, 'power' and 'rights' are the critical problems for their livelihoods. A key person of the Returning Thai

Diaspora said, referring to the suffering from this matter, “...If the Returning Thai Diaspora can vote in elections for the village headman, the current headman will not be elected because all activities related to the Returning Thai Diaspora must work through him. So, everything related to us is blocked at this stage and cannot pass to the positions above to make the decision...”

In this sense, power and rights may be claimed as ‘*political capital*’ and considered as endogenous assets for making a living which the Returning Thai Diaspora can convert into positive livelihood outcomes that are related to the ‘*capabilities approach*’ developed by Amartya Sen.

5. Conclusion

The Returning Thai Diaspora has a cohesive history, consciousness and identity with Thai people, but does not have the rights and power with which to access livelihood assets/capitals in Thai society. Consequently, they have formulated ‘transnational livelihoods’ as one of their livelihood strategies, which also include living across borders and in transnational workplaces, fleeing wars, and transferring capital and resources to make a living. ‘Risk’ is the core idea in formulating their choices as they often do dangerous work and may be cheated of wages or sometimes loses their capital when policies change. Members of the Returning Thai Diaspora lose political rights at all levels; therefore, ‘*political capital*’ is a significant asset/capital for their livelihoods. The sustainable livelihoods approach may build on ‘power and rights’ issues and help lead to an understanding of ways in which existing power structures affect the livelihoods of people. In this way, policy makers may be encouraged to be aware of people in vulnerable contexts who claim their rights and begin to play an active role as citizens, as the Returning Thai Diaspora is doing

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