The Absence of Women’s Role in Hua Na Dam Rehabilitation Projects in Ban Nong Ong Village, Si Saket Province, Thailand

Surasom Krisanachuta
Saowanee T. Alexander
Pinwadee Srisupan
Thitarat Phanchana

Abstract

Part of Nong Ong Village, in Thailand’s Si Saket Province, was submerged beneath the reservoir of the Hua Na Dam. In the lead up to the dam’s construction, the villagers embarked on a prolonged protest against the construction project; and after its completion, maintained pressure on the authorities to implement and improve community rehabilitation programs. Nong Ong’s women played a key role in the villagers’ efforts to draw the state’s attention to the impacts of the construction. This paper explores Nong Ong women’s opinions and their participation in post-dam rehabilitation projects by examining the village’s socioeconomic profiles, the effectiveness of their initiatives, and the extent to which women benefited from them. It was found that rehabilitation programs, which were designed to engage villagers in a top-down fashion, have created further problems rather than solved them. Without taking into account the political dynamics in the village and paying attention to voices usually unheard like those of women, state-funded rehabilitation programs fall short of achieving their goal of fully engaging members of target communities. For this reason, state-funded rehabilitation programs should start from the bottom up by addressing the needs of affected villagers by taking into
consideration issues such as social justice and gender at the grassroots level before formulating rehabilitation policies.

**Introduction**

Thailand’s impoverished Northeast (Isaan) was the focus of intensive dam-building in the 1960s, that included the Chulabhorn, the Ubonrat, and the Sirinthorn dams, all constructed as part of the country’s national economic plan. Their primary purpose was to generate electricity in support of the economic growth. In the 80s, dam construction was subsumed under the Khong-Chi-Mun Megaproject and the ambitious Green Isaan project, both of which aimed to transform the region through irrigation (Sneddon, 2003). In 1989, the Thai government announced a plan to construct the Hua Na Dam on the Mun River in Kanthararom District, Si Saket Province. It would be the largest dam in the Khong-Chi-Mun megaproject. Ban Nong Ong, our research site, was identified as one of the villages that would be inundated by the dam’s reservoir. 73 households, they were told, would be affected (Living River Siam Association, 1998). The announcement set in motion a series of protests by local villagers concerned about the potentially damaging effects of resettlement on their livelihoods.

Construction of the dam commenced in 1992, and took eight years to complete. During that time, the villagers’ protests became part of the larger civil society movement known as the ‘Assembly of the Poor’, which, collectively, gave the protesters some degree of negotiating power with the state (cf. Missingham, 2003; Shannon, 2006). According to Missingham (2003), the Assembly of the Poor was a coalition of several networks of ordinary people, mostly from the Northeast, who were affected by state development projects. They grievances varied but many involved land rights issues, dam constructions, income complaints, and debts (Baker, 2000). The Assembly led several protests in the 90s with the largest
and most significant one was called the 99-Day Protest in 1997 where the protesters occupied areas around the Government House for 99 days to pressure the government to address their grievances. Large numbers of Nong Ong villagers joined the movement, some of whom rose up to leading positions.

In February 2013, when Nong Ong villagers joined other dam-related protesters at Rasi Salai Dam and occupied part of the Rasi Salai Dam, women formed the majority of the nearly 1,000 protesters, because men remained at home to tend farm animals. Women camped out and cooked for fellow protestors; they passed the time of day by weaving bamboo baskets, fishing nets, and so forth, as they did at home. Their protests were not about stopping the dam, which was completed in 2000, but to call the state’s attention to their demands and grievances (Prachatai, 2013). Their determination, however, led to a state-approved Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which was conducted between 2006 and 2009 based on research by academics at Ubon Ratchathani University in collaboration with a consulting company (Manorom et al., 2009). Among other things, the EIA recommendation capped the dam’s normal water level at 112 meters above mean sea level (three meters lower the dam’s maximum retention capacity) and led to rehabilitation programs. None of the villagers gained any financial compensation for livelihoods losses, however. This is because there has been an ongoing dispute between the state and the villagers in identifying individuals eligible for compensation.

The villagers’ prolonged protests against the dam attracted much attention. Rehabilitation projects and aid in different forms started to come to the community in 2013. There has been no attempt to assess whether this assistance is well distributed in the community, not least amongst gender lines. Previous research has shown gender differences in ordinary people’s dealing with impacts of state or corporate imposition. In her study of the Damodar Valley Corporation dam project in eastern India, Lahiri-Dutt (2012) has shown that the dam affected men and women in different ways because of their traditionally assigned divisions of labor. For example, floods resulting from the dam...
construction made it harder for women to fetch water for household use. Damage to their farms also forced women to sell their assets in order to meet household financial demands. These are just some examples on how dam construction affects women in ways that can be easily overlooked. While this study is not directly related to our research, it highlights the importance of a micro-level analysis of development projects on poor people's lives, which uncover gender issues. Other studies that examined the effectiveness of water governance schemes which aimed to fully engage women in decision making have found problems due to a mismatch between the program expectations prescribed by policy holders and the real-life practice based on traditional community values; women thus were not fully engaged in these top-down participatory programs (Coles & Wallace, 2005; Singh, 2008). In addition to this, Agarwal (1997) has warned that it can be problematic to view communities as ungendered and participation as an undoubtable step towards gender equity. While it is not our goal to examine gender equity in this research project, we agree with Argawal that communities themselves are a locus of contesting social forces and thus deserve to be examined. We thus conducted this research of Nong Ong’s women as a case study of a potentially marginalized group when it comes to community management of resources available in the years after the completion of the dam.

The specific goals of this research were: to study the effect of water and land management related Hua Na dam construction with respect to the creation of awareness of gender equality at different levels in terms of access to resources, control, and the violation of rights in managing resources; to study women's adaptation after the completion of the Hua Na in terms of gender relations, livelihoods, and economy, women's roles and participation in developing and managing resources, and politics in public and private spheres, and to empower women to participate in and benefit from rehabilitation projects in the future in terms of social justice and gender equality in water and landscape governance. The findings reported in this paper are based on the issues related to women's
participation (or lack of it) in the management of rehabilitation projects and government aids after the dam.

**Background information on Nong Ong village**

Nong Ong village is located in Khanthararom District, Si Saket Province. It is about 9 kilometers upstream the Mun River from Hua Na Dam. The village covers around 8500 rai (ca. 1360 hectares). Of these, 300 rai (48 hectares) are covered with buildings, and 8000 rai (1280 hectares) are given over to farmlands. Public land covers 339 rai (54 hectares). Based on interview information with the village leaders, the village is home to 102 households. Its total population is 575 (253 males and 322 females). The majority of the villagers practice Buddhism. Based on oral history, the village was established around 180 years ago. Over the year, there have been 13 village heads, all of whom were men.

![Figure 1: Nong Ong in relation to Hua Na Dam](Photo credit: Google Map.)
Methods

To answer the research questions, we conducted our field research over a period of one year (July 2015-July 2016) at Nong Ong village. We collected data from semi-structured interviews, field notes from participant observation, and survey questionnaires on the villagers' socioeconomic profiles. We interviewed both community leaders in focus groups and individual interviews with 25 women, some of whom were involved in the anti-dam protests. These are ordinary women in the village, who have no connection with any power holders in the community. Most of them are also poor and rely on different sources of income in order to make ends meet. Our interview questions aimed to examine whether the informants thought that the dam impacted their lives in any way and how they earned their living, and whether and to what degree they were involved in post-dam rehabilitation programs.

We took part in community activities and observed the events in their entirety. These activities were merit-making festivals, a tree-planting event, to name but a few. We randomly passed out questionnaires to 80 households aiming to record their demographic and socioeconomic information. Of these, survey data from 67 households came back. Data from these different sources of data-collection methods were combined and analyzed for recurring themes.

Findings and discussion

Our quantitative and qualitative analyses have shown that, at first glance, the village seems to be a healthy one with steady income and hard-working villagers. The village protesters who fought hard during the days of the protests are now in their 60s. Many of these have stepped into the background and have become less politically active. Having lived through the struggles then and now, however, they were our primary informants, who were able to reflect on the many changes that have occurred since the construction of the dam.
Socioeconomic background of Nong Ong village

The following table shows a general socio-economic profile of the village. Nong Ong villagers earn their living from different sources of income. Based on the 67 respondents, the average annual household income is thus approximately 254,000 baht (ca. US$7,300), which is relatively high when compared to the average annual household income for the Northeast in the 2011 census data, which was 219,000 baht (ca. US$6,300) (National Statistics Office, 2011).

Table: Estimated village income and food consumption expenses based on the survey results.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated village income</th>
<th>Estimated village food consumption expenses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Estimated Amount %</td>
<td>Amount %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sales of rice</td>
<td>2,352,000 13.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice consumption</td>
<td>1,560,000 88.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of bamboo shoots</td>
<td>1,045,000 6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamboo shoot consumption</td>
<td>19,500 1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of other products</td>
<td>266,800 1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption of other foods</td>
<td>23,000 1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of farm animals</td>
<td>1,089,000 6.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm animal consumption</td>
<td>18,800 1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proceeds from daily farming</td>
<td>1,650,000 9.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy products consumption</td>
<td>10,000 0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of forest foods</td>
<td>194,300 1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest food consumption</td>
<td>69,000 3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales of caged fish</td>
<td>1,330,000 7.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption of caged fish</td>
<td>24,000 1.36</td>
</tr>
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Rice farming is ubiquitous but only delivers about 14 percent of villagers’ income. Around 34 percent of the income comes from the sale of agricultural products such as bamboo shoots, fish, cow's milk, rubber, and forest food. The largest income sources are non-agricultural such as labor wages and small vending businesses. Most households do not rely on rice farming (because they cannot). Many households have members who work as government employees, or as skilled or unskilled laborers in town. These jobs account for as much as 48 percent of income. About 5 percent of the income is from remittances from family members who work elsewhere. Taken together, remittances and income from non-agricultural activity account for 53 percent of the villagers' household income. This shows that Nong Ong villagers, like their fellow Northeasterners, are connected to the globalized world in which agriculture alone does not suffice to help them keep up with the cost of living.

Our survey did not include consumption of non-food products and other household expenses, so missing from the picture is the villagers’ debt situation. However, the results show that much of what the villagers grow or produce is for sale, not for their own consumption.

In order to invest in their agricultural activities, the villagers rely on loans from the government's Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives (BAAC). Interestingly, non-traditional farming activities such as dairy, bamboo shoot, and fish farming were not initiated by the government. The villagers either formed a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sales of captured fish</th>
<th>Consumption of captured fish</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>202,700</td>
<td>40,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8,124,840</td>
<td>202,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances</td>
<td>40,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>779,000</td>
<td>579,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17,033,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,765,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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960
co-operative or decided to try new activities on their own. The shows that the villagers were not passive in the way they responded to financial needs.

Concerned with the prospect of facing a change in their livelihoods after the dam, the villagers started to look for alternative sources of income with the help from the BAAC, but this time as a community, not individual effort. The dairy farmers’ co-operative is an example of how the villagers have tried to collectively negotiate with the BAAC and secure loans for its members. In 2011, several villagers spoke with a former villager who had relocated and worked for a dairy co-op in Sara Buri Province. They started conversations about a possibility for villagers to begin doing dairy farming. These casual, friendly conversations turned into a serious, collective effort. Villagers finally formed a co-op and secured BAAC loans to its members. In an interview in July 2015, an informant in her 60s said that she and her husband had been doing dairy farming for three years. They also owned and worked on rice paddies. She said that so far their cows produced a good amount of milk, which they sold to the co-op in Sara Buri. Cash receipts were sufficient to allow a monthly payment on the BAAC loan. The only complaint was that the two of them had to work very hard. Prior to dairy farming, she and her husband had been trying different jobs in order to make ends meet and on the day of the interview she was feeling unwell, recovering from a head cold which had kept her bedbound for a few days. She still looked very frail. We asked why she did not rest. She said she could not while pointing at her cows. ‘Too much work to do, child,’ she said to one of our team members. When we asked if she had any children to help, she said she did not want her college-bound daughter to suffer this hard work. She hoped that education would give the daughter a better job—an aspiration shared by many Isan villagers. Our informant, however, stressed that the dairy business had not returned a profit as yet, but they were hopeful that it would. The dairy business generates just enough to make payments and get by every month.
It should be noted that when it comes to earning a living, the men and women of Nong Ong work side by side in all their activities, just like agricultural communities elsewhere (cf. Earth et al, 2009; Lebel et al, 2011). Nong Ong women have additional activities to earn extra money. For example, reed mat weaving is a skill they have practiced for generations. Reeds are in abundance. In the past when rice farming was the main activity, women would weave reed mats between rice growing seasons or whenever they did not have to work on the paddies.

In 1999, a government agency assisted Nong Ong women to set up a group to help them develop community products for sale. The ‘Khlum Satri Nong Ong’ [Women’s Group of Nong Ong] was created and the product of choice was the reed mat. At that time, there were 30 members. They were able to make 30-40 mats annually. The problem was sales. While forming the group had helped the to get some funding from the state, it did not help with them with selling their products. Later, a flood in 2002 damaged their group’s equipment and tools. Members thus thought that it was not viable to work as a group. They decided to discontinue their production of mats as a group and revert to the traditional way of doing businesses, which rely on individual effort.

Today, most women who weave mats are the elderly who can no longer do physically laborious agricultural work. They tend to stay at home caring for their grandchildren and working on the paddies. Mat weaving does not earn them much money; instead, they tend to keep the mats as souvenirs for guests. So far, no government agencies have helped them to develop other marketable products from reeds and they themselves are not interested in turning it into a income-earning activity. Mat weaving is, therefore, merely a way of conserving traditional knowledge and passing time creating something for use in the household. The Women’s Group continues to exist and its members have tried different occupational activities - including duck farming in 2003 - which was financially sponsored by the Social Development Department.
Several households grow bamboo shoots for sale to middlemen, who come to the farm and buy the shoots in bulk there. Some villagers find it to be an easy source of income. Bamboo shoot farming, too, started around 2011. One shoot farmer said that she had started cultivating bamboo because it required very little care. In addition, bamboo grows very fast, and thus turn a quick profit, even if prices sometimes vary. Some villagers had even felled their rubber trees and cleared wooded areas on their land farm to bamboo. When the prices are low, some villagers will let the shoots grow fully, and then sell the cane for other purposes.

In 2012 a 47-year-old informant who for years worked in a factory in Bangkok, decided to return to her took a 260,000 baht BAAC loan using their property as collateral. They used the money to start a dairy farm and put a down payment on a vehicle. So far, it has been a struggle as they have to work very hard to make their payments to the bank. This family essentially joined the Nong Ong tradition of being self-reliant with little-to-no expectation of economic support from the government.

In sum, like their fellow Northeasterners, they take various jobs to earn a living. Their livelihoods after the dam now reflect globalization at the village level, in which they become more entrepreneurial; the subsistence way of life is no longer viable.

_Plight-turned opportunities and further conflicts_

The Hua Na Dam put Nong Ong and other neighboring villages in the spotlight. The construction of the dam without local villagers’ approval was a violation of their right to participate in water governance given the fact that the dam project was a state imposition on their community. At the very least, the villagers had the right to express their concerns over how the dam would affect their livelihoods. The villagers’ efforts to call for an EIA were successful despite the fact that it
came long after the completion of the dam. The EIA, which was completed and available in 2009 recommended 16 rehabilitation plans with a total budget of 181.21 million baht (ca. US$5 million) (Manorom et al, 2009) to implement in 5 districts affected by the dam (Muang, Yang Chum Noi, Kantararom (where Nong Ong is located), Rasi Salai, and Uthumphon Phisai). The government accepted these plans and assigned different government agencies to implement them. Of these plans, only one was specifically designed to involve local villagers and a non-government organization (NGO) called the Tham Mun Project, an NGO that worked closely with the villagers during the days of the protests, to implement the plan. This EIA-mandated 10-year plan (also known as Plan 11) was launched in 2013. It aimed to cover four domains of operation. In the agricultural domain, the goal was to promote organic farming and a local market. Conservation of natural resources and environment was another domain; it focused on the promotion of community forests. In the cattle farming domain, the goal was to promote cattle farming in limited space (due to projected inundated land). The last domain was fisheries, which aimed to promote the conservation of aquatic animals and strengthen the network of fishermen. In practice, however, this domain has been carried out to conserve local fishes rather than to help fishermen improve their livelihoods from fishing. Common project activities include workshops on local fish breeding and conservation methods.

In 2013, members of the Assembly of the Poor led an effort in collaboration with the Tham Mun Project and local village leaders from neighboring villages, to implement Plan 11. Based on our interviews, the villagers who participated in the administration of this plan were chosen from a pool of former protest leaders. The villagers co-managed the project with the NGO with a budget of approximately 6 million baht (ca. US$173,000) for use in the first phase of the plan implementation. They carried out specific projects in four domains across four districts. However, not all villages in these four districts were target sites.
Thus, the aids were not equally distributed. For instance, Nong Ong village only largely benefited from the activity promoting natural resources through the community forest project. Examples of projects included a campaign to protect wetlands and a campaign to build a network of the lower-Mun communities, a project promoting traditional ways of aquaculture. The villagers had the opportunity to work together as a team, this time, not at a protest site, but as key players in an effort to benefit their villages. It goes without saying that the villagers' efforts in protesting and negotiating with the state did pay off. In practice, implementation of 16 different plans (Plan 11 included) as stakeholders, turned out to be a daunting task and sometimes created more problems.

For example, the aforementioned 16 plans had some overlapping goals but spearheaded by different government units while only Plan 11 is not run by a government unit. Some of the plans aimed to conserve natural resources and forests. A plan aiming to conserve forest, which was implemented by a government unit, was contested by Nong Ong villagers as surveyors inadvertently marked the boundary of the target ‘forest’ on villagers’ properties. However, based on our interviews with the villagers, the surveyors were only contract workers and escaped the responsibility in rectifying the problems. The villagers further commented that the government unit, however, never held any public hearing about their plan to mark the boundary and turn the forest into a ‘learning’ space for forest conservation. It never consulted with local villagers about how to go about implementing their project. Given these two serious problems, the villagers fiercely contested the plan. To make matters worse, instead of addressing the problems, a senior bureaucrat overseeing that project accused the villagers of destroying yang trees (a tall tropical tree) in the forest by burning its trunk to get an oily resin and sell it as an ingredient for a traditional kindling. Such hostility resulted in the project being put on hold.

In another example, the villagers complained about the Huai Ki Nak stream dredging project in 2015. Again this project was another well-meant effort by the
state to clean Huai Khi Nak stream, which is home to natural food sources for villagers. The contractors dumped a large amount of mud from the stream onto public land, again without consulting with the villagers or community leaders. As a result, grazing land for cattle which the villagers have been using suddenly disappeared. Gone were also wetlands and small wells adjacent to the stream that shelter small animals and plants. The villagers not only complained about these losses but also wondered about the origin of this mysterious project.

Given the fact that Plan 11 has been managed by Tham Mun and former protest leaders, there were also some criticisms about their administration by their fellow villagers. A 66-year-old informant was involved in the plan from its conception. She was one of the anti-dam protest leaders in the Assembly of the Poor and helped to voice the protesters' concerns over prospective inundation of villagers' properties and was the main force behind the push for an EIA. She actively took part in the implementation of Plan 11 in its first year. Chosen as a model homestead by Plan 11 administrators, her backyard garden plots were supplied with herbs and plants to grow and show efforts to conserve nature. However, there was no follow-up visit or communication from the plan administrators until the project ended after its year-long implementation. Asked if she knew why this particular activity under the project ended, she said she did not know. In the second year, however the project shifted its focus from hands-on environmental conservation to a more meeting-based plan for the community to collectively write up district goals for conserving the environment. Village headmen, members of the sub-district administrative organization (SAO), and members of the Assembly of the Poor joined the meeting. The informant too was invited but she refused to attend it. Since then she distanced herself from Plan 11, complaining that there was no other serious effort and viewed this particular campaign as tokenistic at best and did not think Plan 11 in general benefited Nong Ong villagers. Her main grievance was that those who vigorously fought in
the movement did not see the fruits of their efforts in this plan. She appeared to be remorseful about the protesters’ dedication to the fight against the dam, remarking “It was not worth the fight. The compensation from the government that we had fought for would be less than what we could earn from selling our land to investors.”

Also, some plan activities did not even take place in the village. A close look at Plan 11 shows that it has not made a difference in the villagers’ lives when it comes to economic wellbeing. While it is understandable that the plan does not aim to do so given its 4 main objectives mentioned earlier, the villagers are pressured by hardships to expect some sort of concrete effect on their lives. However, with such impact being invisible, it is not surprising that some villagers decided to drop their participation. Interestingly enough, most criticisms on Plan 11 came from former women leaders of the protests, not their male counterparts. It could be that they personally were on the forefront of the struggles as protest leaders, but yet have benefited little from the plan. Alternatively, it could be because the plan ignored potential gender dynamics in its implementation, for some reason women were not well included, which we will discuss later.

To conclude, while post-dam rehabilitation projects have occurred, they have not made a great positive impact to villagers’ lives. Worse still, some projects only make matters worse.

**Access to power, access to benefits**

Rehabilitation activities which involved financial compensation created tensions between community members. Based on our interviews with informants, one of the post-dam projects reserved part of its budget to hire villagers to work on various duties. Those who were not hired were not happy with the decision and thought they were excluded. As for Plan 11 itself, not all villagers were involved, which targeted four districts. And 6 million baht (ca. US$ 200,000) for the first
phase of rehabilitation was not a lot of money given the fact that it would go to sponsor about 25 campaigns and projects.

Actually, villagers who were involved in the projects were those with a good relationship with village leaders and thus were enthusiastic to take part in these plans, which relied heavily on these community leaders (such as the village headman and his deputies). The village’s political dynamics seem to be a key factor in the degree of involvement by different groups in the village. A 79-year-old informant who was deeply involved in the pre-dam protests as one of the leaders complained of being excluded from rehabilitation programs as she puts it:

“Back when I went there (protest sites), I had to sleep on the ground and eat on the grass ... Had no idea where they got us water for a bath. Don’t you hope to get anything. We kicked squirrel meat into their mouths. If they want to turn it into lap [spicy salad], they can. Or if they want to turn it into koi [another type of spicy salad], they can, too. We’re just dogs. All we can do is to watch them (eat) and drool profusely!”

The informant used a metaphor to express her disappointment in the fact she was not involved in the programs. However, we were not able to pinpoint the exact reason that she was not involved. She seemed to think that those programs involved some form of financial compensation, which she thought she did not receive while others did. Such political cleavage seems to run deep in the community.

In another interview, a 51-year-old widow who is a relative of the previous headman said she would have liked to join community groups created after the dam construction, but was never invited. She said that it could have come from the fact that her family supported the former headman in a race for the headman position and thus became estranged from the group of the current headman, who is also her relative. She struggled to make ends meet with only 60,000 baht (ca. US$1,700) annual income from rice and chicken farming on just a little over two acres of land, and a small vending business in town co-owned by her relative, who sends her 20,000-30,000 baht (US$570-865) from the proceeds each year. The informant’s complaint of not being invited by the current headman to join
any village activities or rehabilitation programs is only one side of the story. However, such complaints show that village politics exist and understanding these will help to assess the implementation of rehabilitation projects.

**Women’s participation in post-dam programs**

None of the 16 rehabilitation projects included in Plan 11 was designed with gender awareness. Its projects and campaigns were to involve “everyone”. For example, for the tree-planting activity hosted in August 24, 2015, the village headman called villagers to join in the activities. Men and women, mostly in working ages or older took part in the event. Schoolchildren and their teachers were also there. Based on our field observations, women congregated at a tent preparing food for participants while men prepared spots to plant trees. Gendered divisions of labor were clear. In addition to this, informants we interviewed there said they knew the headman very well and helped out in as many activities as possible.

Recall that the 16 rehabilitation plans were implemented by different government agencies. In fact, observations and interviews during our field research show that only a few took place between 2015 and 2016. Plan activities at Nong Ong itself did not involve any long-term commitment. In addition to the forest conservation activities, other activities included a workshop on how to preserve fish and a workshop on how to conserve local fish species. There was a lack of activities which addressed the community’s economic needs. Of the 25 women interviewed, 13 reported that they were not involved in any rehabilitation plans. Of these 6 admitted that they knew about the plans but did not take part in them. Some of them said that rehabilitation plans were good initiatives but they could not join them. The most common reason was that they were too busy with either their daily struggles to make ends meet or household duties such as taking care of young children for their family members who had to work away from the village. The remaining 7 informants claimed to have no knowledge of the plan, so they did not take part in them. Some elderly women in their late 60s who were actively involved in the dam protests said they were disappointed with the lack of immediate help after the protests were over as well as what they saw as never-
ending negotiations. Their mistrust of the state and some protest leaders grew to the point they felt “burnt out”. Coupled with their old age, these women chose to alienate themselves from community activities.

Given the lack of gender awareness in any of the rehabilitation plans, we decided to include in our examination other development projects that took place after the dam construction. From interviews with villagers and leaders, we found that, since 1999, village women have been formally recognized by the government with its order for the village to form a women’s group, which was discussed earlier. But like other government initiatives, which were not sustainable although the main goal was to promote women’s occupations. Women’s groups came after another.

For example, in 2013, the 15-member Village Women’s Development Committee was formed in a tokenistic manner in which women associated with village power holders became appointed. This, however, was initiated in a top-down fashion by the Department of Social Development, which passed down the order through the existing line of command in the Ministry of Interior, from the provincial down to village level. The pressure was thus on the village headman at the time to try to complete this task of setting up the committee in a timely Manner. This is why how the committee members were selected was not as important as “having names” ready to forward to administrators higher up in the hierarchy of power. The committee’s task was to identify problems that women had and report them to the authorities. One informant said that the committee did not have any real power and the problems reported did not materialize. The lack of a strong support group for women can also be seen in the following example.

One 39-year-old informant takes various jobs to meet her family’s financial demands. She owns a grocery shop in the village, 7-acre rice paddies, a 4-acre rubber plantation, which is a lot by the village’s standard. She also owns a cage farm with 22 pens where she raises tilapia and Nile tilapia. The aquaculture business is based on contract farming with two companies, but she is struggling with the rising fingerling prices. The conditions in the contract, however, force
her to continue with the business. Asked why she did not join the women’s group, she said she was too busy for that. Her short answer actually led us to suspect that she did not see how being a member of the group would help her solve business problems.

An interview with a former member of the Women’s Group of Nong Ong showed that the informant came to realize that state-mandated groups were tokenistic and did not help with their livelihoods in the long run. However, the women’s groups went under different names over the years still exist today. Their primary task is to act as a go-to village organization when government agencies need to implement occupational plans designed for women.

After the group producing reed mats disbanded, in 2003 the next formation took an offer of sponsorship by a government agency to raise ducks for meat. The government agency sponsored 100 ducklings and feed. Members of the group raised the ducks and sold them with at a loss. Within one year, the project collapsed. Once again, the members thought that working together as a women’s group did not work. Some of them resigned, but the group continued. Essentially these groups are an ad hoc repository of state budgets on various projects with the word “women” attached to them. According to our informants, most of these purposes do not address village women’s real needs and were not helpful.

While informants agreed that programs such as tree-planting and forest conservation initiatives in general benefit their village community, but they often concluded that it would be nice for them, as individuals, to get help with their livelihoods, especially informants who struggle financially. For example, an informant would like to see a grass-planting project in low-lying public land where grazing is allowed. She also would like to have access to land where she could grow bamboo in order to earn a living. Another informant would like to have a cash payout, so she could use the money to start a small vending business. But because they do not trust the government with their livelihoods to begin with, Nong Ong women therefore are not bothered by the fact that most past government-initiated assistance programs failed. It should be noted, however, that of the 25 women interviewed, all complained about their livelihoods, and
that they wish they had better resources to earn more to support their families. But those resources were discussed in terms of their individual needs, they thus varied from person to person.

Given this, the picture emerging from our study is that while women struggle with lives after the dam, they do not have a strong network to support each other. They do not blame village men or rehabilitation project officers for obstructing their access to limited benefits. Instead, they chose to struggle on their own. It should be noted that women who complained about rehabilitation projects did not complain because they were women. Nor did they accuse any of the programs or responsible parties of deliberately excluding women. They simply saw those programs as not addressing villagers’ needs. Our impression is that our informants saw themselves as capable as men. What we failed to achieve in our year-long research project is reaching out to less-privileged women in the village, such as those who were relatively poor and not vocal in the community regardless of their village-based political orientations, and trying to hear from them. Despite these shortcomings, we felt that the reason anybody, not just women, was excluded from rehabilitation plans lies in the inherently problematic power structure of the village itself. That Thai villages, not just Nong Ong, are run by village heads with no term limit, who retire at the age of 60, allows individuals in that position to remain a key player in power discourses for too long a time. Consequently, if the heads and villagers are not on good terms, there is a good chance the villages will be politically divided. Such division can last as long as the heads remain in power. For the sake of convenience, rehabilitation efforts tend to use village heads as liaisons with villagers without taking into account intra-community power relationships. As we have seen in this research, some informants complained of not being invited to join rehabilitation activities because they were not “in the loop”. We thus hypothesize that further research into power relationships in the village will reveal layers of conflict in which rehabilitation (or any development) programs are trapped. We further hypothesize that women in the case of Nong Ong, when excluded, are excluded because of they are on the “wrong” party to the conflict, not because they are women. Additionally, it should also be noted that women in our interviews were
from different age groups. Elderly ones in their 60s and up witnessed the struggles against the dam. Some of whom were in the inner circle of protest leaders, but now these once politically engaged women are confined largely to their homes given their age and responsibilities as caretakers of their grandchildren, whose parents have to work. We suspect this might the reason they felt “burnt out” or hopeless. Younger informants have had little involvement in the struggles, and for this reason could possibly hold no resentments towards leaders who now benefit from post-dam rehabilitation programs. As seen in the findings, they complained mostly about livelihoods and wanted to better their family’s economic situation without criticizing any political stakeholders. It is thus possible that women’s generational differences, their lived experiences, and their life cycle affect their views toward these programs.

How Nong Ong women solve their problems reflect the shared trait of Nong Ong villagers. They do not wait for the state to initiate help for them. They know they need to depend on themselves to earn a living. Money is important these days. Expenses on food, schooling, utilities—globalized as part of the larger economic system. Their dairy farmers’ co-op, their engagement in contract farming are just some of the examples of their never-ending search for better sources of income without having to leave the village in search for jobs elsewhere. Their limited participation is post-dam rehabilitation programs simply reflect their lack of interest in waiting for the state to tell them what to do. They leave it to village leaders to deal with these government agencies. And as a result, the village leaders end up being brokers of benefits (if any) whether or not they want to.
Conclusion

We set out to explore potential gender inequality issues in the implementation of post-dam rehabilitation projects at Nong Ong Village by focusing on women’s views. In addition to the fact that the projects are not very successful, we do not see enough evidence to claim that these projects treated men and women in an unequal manner. Our research thus does not reveal any gender issues, if any. However, what we discovered was that these projects, especially Plan 11, which was supposed to engage villagers’ participation failed to engage them fully in the first place. Our findings suggest that problems seem to lie in political dynamics of the village. Villagers of Nong Ong appear to be resilient, courageous, and self-reliant. This is seen in their collective effort to look for alternative livelihoods in recent years and continue to stand up to the imposition by the state in post-dam rehabilitation projects.

It is therefore necessary to understand the villagers’ needs and village politics in order to make sure that intended help from external sources actually respond to their needs effectively. It is suggested that policy holders who design assistance or rehabilitation program should bear in mind that help should be applied to what villagers already do and start from there, not encouraging new activities thought up by program sponsors and imposed upon them in a top-down fashion. Given that our research was confined to women leaders, our finding of no clear evidence for gender inequality may have resulted from that limitation. It is suggested that future research target ordinary women in the village, especially those who are relatively poor or faced with other forms of hardships.

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