



Bridging Multiple Interests to Meet Local Needs in Rural Thailand: The case of Professor Saneh Chimarik

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Professor Saneh Chamarik

“Knowledge is something that cements people together.... If people were properly informed about the issues in development – how the action of one group affects another, how people’s concerns are all interdependent; once people understand and appreciate the fact that they are part of a bigger picture, then people would find it easier to work hand-in-hand.”

Saneh Chamarik

Introduction

The idea of “localism” or “development based on community participation, tradition and the existing local context” had been advocated and practiced in many parts of the world for a long time.

In Latin America, which went through the boom-and-bust cycle of a market-based economy several times, some liberals had started advocating “localism” in response to “the perceived fundamental failures of the growth-oriented development model to improve peoples’ lives.”

In Thailand, many people-centered voices from the academe and the NGO sector had been espousing support towards local based development for quite some time. However, most of the advocates’ voices were drowned by the exaltations of the globalists during the boom of the 1990s. It was said that the globalists captured most of the people’s attention because of the continued upward swing the economy was treading. But the 1997 economic crisis turned the tides and made even staunch believers in globalization stop and re-think the development discourse. More importantly, the said crisis spurred discussions regarding the merits of growth-oriented development as opposed to local based development and regarding the direction of development in Thailand.

Market- vs. Local-based Development

Thailand, like most Asian nations, followed a development model based on the capitalist system. In a World Bank report, it was said that this model in effect resulted to an unbalanced development. It removed the development dynamics from the rural areas and shifted it to urban centers. The outcome of this was that urban centers flourished, while rural areas became impoverished, especially the non – export producing areas.

The development plans of Thailand had also pointed to this biased and unbalanced growth, which had become more pronounced in the last two decades. The development plans magnified these imbalances by pointing to the average GDP of Thailand. Around the year 1977, Bangkok recorded a GDP of 272.7% while the North and Northeast made 66.2% and 41.6% respectively. Twenty years later, GDP for Bangkok increased to 340.4% while the North and Northeast had fallen to 47.9% and 31.1% respectively.

The development plans also showed that although the incidence of poverty decreased as a result of the tremendous growth of the economy, it was neither eliminated nor eradicated but rather transferred. Poverty became associated with rural communities when it was

recorded that over 90% of the poor lived in the rural areas. It was also noted that income inequality dramatically increased from 1975 to 1999. In 1975, the richest 20% of the population enjoyed a share of 49.26% of total income while the poorest 20%'s share was only 6.05%. In 1994, income distribution changed to 57.52% for the richest 20% and 3.99% for the poorest 20%. By 1999, the inequalities had gone up further with 58.5% and 3.8% respectively.

Many scholars in the country believed that the steep economic take-off, largely fuelled by the export of the country's natural resources, resulted in many adverse effects. One, it was said that the export-oriented development policy resulted in the depletion of the natural resources and the degradation of the environment. Second, the gap between the rich and the poor widened as wealth accumulated primarily in the urban areas and particularly in the hands of a few. Third, it was said that money and greed overwhelmed politics resulting in the formulation of policies largely favoring industries because it controlled the money. Fourth, to support the continuous mass production of goods, industries invested heavily on advertising resulting to widespread materialism and unlimited consumption.

Fifth, agriculture per se was badly neglected, contributing to the increase of poverty incidence in the rural areas. It was said that agricultural production was pursued mainly to support the country's position as the world's fifth biggest agricultural exporter. Thus, the agricultural sector became dependent on the urban sector either as suppliers for the agri-business sector and eventually as providers of migrant, low skilled and low paid workers.

The most harmful part of the growth-oriented model, according to its critics, was that only a minority of people benefited from its gains. Historical records had shown that the material wealth created by the development model had barely trickled down to the less privileged members of society.

Although poor workers benefited from the employment generated by export industries, in some respects, their quality of life was actually deteriorating as a result of environmental problems such as pollution, floods, destruction of forests, among others.

Prof. Saneh Chamarik, chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, believed that these development issues surfaced mainly because the fundamentals subscribed to by the development approach used by the Thai government were all patterned after western settings and failed to consider the Asian context. He said that in the western concept of economics, man and nature were counted as commodities. Man was equated with labor and nature with raw materials. Prof. Saneh opined that,

"If you look at western society, there were only two kinds of people – the employer and the employee. Look at economic textbooks. In my time, economic textbooks talked about work ethics. Now it only talks about employment. This makes a lot of difference."

The emergence of these development problems, which were attributed to the pursuit of a market-based development model, sounded an urgent call to development thinkers for the need to formulate an alternative development model. As a social scientist, Prof. Saneh supported this call saying,

"The essence of social science is to promote scientific attitude and capacity for rational inquiry. We must inquire the outcome of so-called development promoted by neo-liberal economics and economists must respect that human welfare (the end result of all development efforts) is much wider than material goods."

The Localism Discourse

Several Thai intellectuals believed that the "bubble burst" was basically a result of developing wealth rather than developing society. They argued that market-based model focused on capital formation generated by the export-oriented agricultural growth. Further, it was said that whatever reforms made by and within the government would not be effective because the interests of the present power structure, which was dominated by business, would always prevail. In effect, in a market-based model, the interests of the people would always be inferior to the interests of businesses.

In the localism discourse, Prof. Saneh Chamarik was considered as one of the main promoters of community-based development. He championed the idea of the community becoming a basis for human and social needs in opposition to the de-humanization of economics. For him, the ultimate aim of development should be to

"Create a new social order in which the economy serves society, rather than society serves the economy".

Prof. Saneh was not alone in championing the cause of local based development in Thailand. Non-governmental organizations, community groups, social movements and several academicians had also voiced their dissatisfaction with the present development model. However, scholars had varying concepts of alternative models of development. One school of thought forwarded the idea of environmental economics, where environmental costs of development interventions were calculated as a countermeasure to the anticipated benefits.

Other social thinkers supported the idea of the "Buddhist economics". In contrast to the classical economic equation of maximum consumption leading to maximum satisfaction, Buddhist economics emphasized moderate or wise consumption, leading to people's well being. Still another model proposed agricultural production for self-sufficiency as a way of life and as an integrated part of community culture. This was differentiated from the agriculture production mainly for export.

Prof. Saneh advocated this third concept. For him and other advocates of the idea of community based development and the localism discourse, the concept of a self-reliance economy with agriculture as the central activity was more appropriate to the Thai culture. Only that agriculture is to be understood in a dynamic and progressive perspective

In promoting self-reliance however, Prof. Saneh was not totally abandoning western concepts as he said,

"Modern scientific knowledge and learning therefore has always a great role to play, not to supplant or suppress, but to supplement indigenous knowledge and scholarship. One should, however, be aware that knowledge and theories (or technology for that matter) are not neutral but are part of a greater knowledge construction."

Some critics of the localism discourse countered that the ideas of agricultural self-sufficiency and community self-reliance were backward looking since it was in effect forcing the country to regress or turn back history. But Prof. Saneh Chamarik reiterated that localism did not

“Imply a need or desirability to fall back on the traditional past and to keep away from the realities of the contemporary world”.

One area where the debates on localism had flourished was in the area of community-based forest management.

Impact of Development to Forests in Thailand

The forests of the Kingdom of Thailand were part of the tropical resource-based forest belt that included several Southeast Asian countries. Although the forests of Thailand had been suffering severe deforestation during the last half century, particularly over the past three decades (1961 – 1991), it was noted that the development model pursued by government aggravated deforestation.

From 1984 to 1994, Thailand actively promoted a market-oriented, export-led policy in pursuit of NIChood (Newly Industrialized Country status). At first glance, the strategy seemed to succeed as evidenced by the country's recorded annual economic growth of 8.2 percent, outperforming even the “tiger” economy of South Korea. However, the country also recorded a significant decline in forest cover, from 54 percent (1960s) to less than 28 percent (1990s).

This dramatic loss of forestland had triggered a chain reaction that resulted to related problems such as soil erosion, desertification, migration to urban areas, unemployment and perennial poverty among the population, especially the rural poor whose livelihood depended on the forests.

Until the mid-1960s, almost all of Thailand's logging concessions granted were concentrated in the North, covering approximately 40 percent of that region's land area. However, in 1968 a government strategy to accelerate economic development profoundly changed that situation. Over five hundred thirty-year logging concessions were vetted throughout the Kingdom, encompassing close to one-half the nation's geographical area and most of its designated reserve forest. The following years witnessed rapid commercial exploitation of Thailand's most valuable and accessible timber, including its famous teak.

Over the past decade, there had been indications of heightened awareness and new directions in forest management, paralleling similar trends in other Asian nations. With the rise of environmental movements, including vocal, urban-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists, public attention had turned to such issues as upland deforestation and illegal logging, downstream erosion, landslides and flooding, and conservation of biodiversity in protected areas.

However, it was noted that although there had been an increase in concern for the environment, there had been less consideration for the plight of forest-dependent rural communities as well as their potentially strategic role as active partners of government in the protection and stabilization of forest resources.

Deepening Ties With Rural People

Prof. Saneh harbored a deep sense of concern for rural development. This was influenced by his brief stint as rural development advisor to former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda in 1980.

Even back then, he had advocated for rural self-reliance as a development strategy. He refused to be re-appointed after one year on the job when the government shelved his rural development proposal in favor of its own traditional dole-out approach to development, which was primarily based on the capitalist system. One example of this “dole-out” approach that he protested was when the government gave out money to the rural people so that the people could afford to buy products produced by big companies. In the process, the purchasing power of the rural people was enhanced but their self-reliance was not developed.

Despite this frustration, Prof. Saneh worked to promote rural development through other avenues. In 1987, Prof. Saneh retired from the academe and decided to spend considerable time in the remote farmlands of Thailand to continue studying the lives of the rural villagers. According to him, he had learned more from his work with the rural villagers than from his thirty years in the academe.

“I learned more from the informal part of my education than the formal part. After my retirement, I learned a lot more because I came to experience real life, real people. In the academic community, what I was mainly involved in were lots of ideas running around – reading, writing, that’s about all. Even my writing was very limited since I didn’t have real life, real people. Working closely with villagers revealed their enormous potential as well as their limitations to me.”

“So far, the government had underestimated rural communities and ended up patronizing them. If we look closely at the rural people, whom we often think of as poor, stupid and backward, we will find they are indeed owners of profound wisdom.”

He cited the fact that 70% to 80% of knowledge about medicines came from local villagers yet government did not recognize this. He advocated for the recognition and integration of the local wisdom of rural villagers in the management of rural development interventions instead of imposing western ideas of development to the communities. He strongly urged government to formulate interventions that would harness local knowledge and develop indigenous industries in order to help rural people sustain themselves and decrease their dependence on foreign aid.

Listening to Prof. Saneh speak, one would get the impression that he was anti-western. He spoke passionately about rural people’s self-reliance and about Thais’ taking charge of their own tropical forests without relying on foreign funding. He bewailed the “westernization” of education, particularly political science, which was close to his heart. He even protested the equation of individualism with the concepts of human rights, which were applicable only on western settings.

However, he strongly refuted this charge. According to him:

"I learn from the west but I also see what (western concepts) are irrelevant to our society. We have to focus on the relevant things. We should not minimize what we learned from the west but we need to make adaptations to serve the context of our livelihood."

The Local Development Institute (LDI)

In 1991, CIDA was winding down a rural development project, which was involved with channeling resources to the grassroots level. CIDA was exploring ways to institutionalize the pilot project. For this purpose, CIDA agreed to sponsor the establishment of the Local Development Foundation (LDF), which would serve as a mechanism to continue to channel international resources to the grassroots level. The LDF, in turn, established the Local Development Institute (LDI) as its operational arm.

Prof. Saneh Chamarik was at the right place at the right time. He was offered to head LDI, which he accepted on the strict condition that LDI operated independently from its foreign donor and worked with the primary objective of building rural people's self-reliance. Also, he wanted to take advantage of the opportunity because back then, he believed that it was high time to define a new meaning of development – one that was based on local terms and not defined by international funding institutions.

This belief was triggered by two motivations. First Prof. Saneh believed that being a resource-based country, it seemed logical for Thailand to pursue a resource-based economic development instead of a market-based one. Second, Prof. Saneh believed that the development concepts of industrialized countries were based on their own understanding of their situations, which were often different from the realities of Asian societies. However, he knew that a new definition could not be formed and subsequently popularized without a solid foundation or basis. Thus, he envisioned an organization that would have a strong research and development component.

Towards this purpose, LDI under Prof. Saneh's stewardship expanded the scope of its work from channeling resources to include policy-oriented research, national-level networking and linkages with commercial enterprises to provide loans for community-based businesses. It conducted research and advocacy work on impacts of mainstream development approaches used by the government, particularly in the rural sector. LDI also actively participated in Thailand's development by initiating multi-sectoral dialogues on issues that affected rural and urban communities, including the use and allocation of natural resources, environmental degradation, women and development, AIDS, and civil society.

Through these efforts, LDF/LDI provided leadership and support to the Thai NGO community and grassroots networks. Eventually, the Thai government acknowledged the importance of cooperating with NGOs and community-based organizations through LDI. The Local Development Foundation/Institute was considered a unique organization because it was not common to find a Thai development institution that had successfully bridged government, civil society and grassroots organizations. This capacity to bring multiple stakeholders together allowed LDI to play a key role as a catalyst for reform in the development sector.

Research as the Foundation for National Development

According to Prof. Saneh, previously there was a misconception that rural development meant basically to satisfy the basic needs of rural people. He added that the idea behind rural development went beyond the basic needs and focused instead on sustainable development and self-reliance.

He also said that no single person was responsible for promoting local based development. Rather, the issues and concepts of local based development emanated from the rural people themselves, which were brought to the national level by more well – known individuals. As an educator, Prof. Saneh stressed that,

“There was really no need for personal leadership in bridging people together at the community level. The important thing is to identify a problem that is common to all people. However, identifying that common problem – one would need research. In everything we do, we have to do research because we need to create knowledge and understanding.”

Being an academician himself, Prof. Saneh emphasized that he did not refer to the kind of research that most academicians understood. He differentiated this brand of research from the academic research that was confined to the parameters of the academe and often neglected practical application. He referred to research that encouraged rural people to be actively involved in the development process so that they themselves would learn while getting to know their own people and communities. This research also espoused the idea of broadening the perspectives of rural people to extend their concerns beyond family and friends and to include fellow persons who also depended on the same natural base resources they use. He added:

“For me, this is something I can claim as an achievement – to instill the idea of the significance of research to the rural communities, NGOs and policy makers.”

The first researches undertaken by LDI looked into the participation of local communities in the management of forests. Although back then, there were several community based forest management initiatives, there were no systematic documentation and thus understanding of how these systems worked. Initial studies on community practices also pointed to a fundamental issue in the manner with which communities managed their forests. This basic issue was the fact that most of the rural community groups protecting the forests worked independently of one another. This had created conflicts of interests between and among rural communities because there was a general lack of understanding of the interrelationships of managing natural resources. The first studies revealed that there would be one community in charge of a piece of forest on top of a mountain. However, this community often did not realize that its piece of the forest was only part of a bigger forest and that its actions affected other areas of the forest particularly those at the bottom of the mountain.

This was also true for people living along the rivers. Previously, river communities did not realize that their piece of the river was just a small part of an entire resource base area and that their actions to protect their piece of the river affected other communities. Prof. Saneh, thus realized, that it was important for all the people living in the rural communities to come to a common understanding of their dependency and interdependency on the same common resource base.

Instead of undertaking the research themselves, Prof. Saneh gathered together people from the academe, NGOs and from the grassroots community to conduct local action researches that would study local community practices. People from the forest communities were invited to participate in the conduct of these researches. By making the local people actively participate in the research being undertaken, Prof. Saneh effectively made the local people understand that their actions affected other communities within the same forest. Prof. Saneh was also able to make the local people understand different approaches to local based forest management without forcing theories and concepts down to them. The participation of the local people in the research also resulted in the systematic documentation of local folk wisdom, as the people themselves started to put their traditional practices in a concrete and systematic form. This initiative also paved the way for the acceptance of local practical research into an important body of knowledge. Proof of this was the fact that some of the results of the LDI researches were later on incorporated in several national policies on rural development.

Community Rights in the Constitution

One of the most significant results of the researches undertaken by LDI was that it served as the basis for the inclusion of the concept of community rights in the 1997 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand. Section 46 under Chapter III “Rights and Liberties of the Thai People” of the Thai Constitution stated that:

“Persons so assembling as to be a traditional community shall have the right to conserve or restore their customs, local knowledge, arts or good culture of their community and of the nation and participate in the management, maintenance, preservation and exploitation of natural resources and the environment in a balanced fashion and persistently as provided by law.”

In the previous Thai constitution, the idea of community rights was not supported nor recognized by government. According to Prof. Saneh, advocating the inclusion of “community rights” in the constitution was a very difficult undertaking. First they had to find one champion in the group responsible for drafting the constitution. He said: “We were able to advocate for the inclusion of community rights in the constitution through a friend from the academe, who was a member of the constitutional formation. We were lucky because this friend was very receptive to the idea. We invited him to take part in the research on community rights and asked him to observe its practices. Thus, he was able to champion community rights (during the deliberations in the formation of the constitution).

There were lots of oppositions to the original idea of community rights. It was only accepted on the condition that the term “community” would be qualified to mean “indigenous community”. Criteria were established to define an indigenous community.”

According to Prof. Saneh, although it was not a total victory, this achievement was considered very significant. Ever since “community rights” was enshrined in the 1997 Thai Constitution, Thais had started to claim these rights whenever there were projects that affected their communities. Although the government had to contend with more disturbances and longer timeframes, Prof. Saneh considered this as a very positive development since local communities were now actively speaking out against government policies that infringed on the community rights of local people.

Community-Based Forest Management

Prior to the 1997 Constitution, it was thought that there was an inadequate formal policy framework, which specifically addressed community rights and responsibilities in managing public forest lands. This was despite that fact that it was widely known that there were widespread, often spontaneous grassroots initiatives by local communities across Thailand to organize themselves around forest protection and management. In 1992, the Royal Forest Department (RFD) conducted a national inventory on community-based forest management, which resulted in the documentation of over 12,000 traditional rural community groups protecting various forest patches that ranged in size from about 1 to 4,000 hectares. These activities were considered unofficial since the Thailand government through the RFD maintained sole jurisdiction and control of the forest reserves. In some instances however, the Tambon (subdistrict) Councils and RFD formalized agreements with local people to undertake pilot programs on forest management.

Community forestry had always been a highly politicized issue in Thailand. It involved contesting discourses between “centralized, professionally-oriented forest management on the one hand and a social movement of marginalized forest communities who advocate social justice and decentralization of resource management” on the other.

Some NGOs, particularly environmental ones, had been very critical of the Thai Government’s approach to forest conservation. Some had protested the planting of fast growing trees such as the eucalyptus or the use of a larger part of the forest for commercial purposes. Forest dwellers, on the other hand, maintained that it was their right to continue to get their livelihood from the forests. Some experts had said that the debate had degenerated to a class conflict – between rural communities who depended on forests for their livelihoods and an urban-based elite and middle-class that wanted to preserve "wilderness" to be used for recreation, trekking and tourism.

The Royal Forest Department (RFD), on the other hand, wanted to maintain control of the forests as part of its mandate. RFD attempted several times to relocate communities living in protected areas. However it seemed that these moves had increased the marginalization of local communities and worsened rural conflicts. It had also caused further loss of forest areas as displaced forest dwellers, looking for alternative places to live, cleared other forests elsewhere.

Amid these heated exchanges of opinions, Prof. Saneh had patiently pointed out to NGOs and government that these conflicts were not helping at all because it did not attack the root of the problem. According to him, the root problem originated from the Government’s Forestry Master Plan. The Forestry Master Plan had divided the forest into two parts: the conservation forest (national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and sensitive watersheds) and the economic forest (where actual occupants might get resource tenure without rights of transferring land except through inheritance).

Unfortunately, in support of its development plan, government had allocated a larger part of the tropical forests for commercial purposes. Thus, RFD was quite justified in exercising its mandate. Prof. Saneh pointed out that the first step to resolve the issue was therefore to change the Forestry Master Plan. To provide the foundation for the proposed changes, Prof.

Saneh once again initiated a gathering of NGOs, academe and local leaders to begin a concerted effort to review the master plan and proposed revisions. This was the first time that NGOs and government had come together to do action research on community-based forest management. The group received support from government to conduct the research.

After years of negotiations between RFD, local people and NGOs, a proposed community forest bill was finally drafted, which included the rights of forest-based communities to use, manage and protect their forests. The draft bill further recognized the legal status of communities living in and around Thailand's National Forest Reserves and proposed the establishment of community forests by rural communities to manage forest areas in cooperation with the Royal Forestry Department. It was the first piece of legislation to use a constitutional mechanism that allowed local people to propose a law on the basis of 50,000 signatures. The proponents of the bill actually gathered 52,698 signatures from local people from all over Thailand. The bill was presented to Parliament in July 2000. The debates on the draft community forestry bill centered primarily on, which was the appropriate approach of resource management. The state-initiated community forestry approach focused on "well-established communities and was based on reforestation and commercial tree plantation on cropland and degraded national forest reserves". The grassroots-NGOs-academe approach, based on the concept of community rights and common property systems, involved "conservation-oriented, community-based forest management by forest communities in peripheral areas with poorly defined resource regimes".

Expanding Research on Community Rights in Thailand

In 1999, Prof. Saneh started action researches, which would define the concepts of "community rights" within the Southeast Asian context. These integrated researches also involved the participation of local communities, local intellectuals, academicians and other people who shared interests on the issue of community rights. According to Prof. Saneh, the idea of "community rights" was not new. Although not recognized by the west, for the past fifteen years, the indigenous people's movements of Canada, the US and Australia had been exercising their community rights in advocating for the return of their ancestral lands.

Once again, Prof. Saneh believed that oppositions to the concepts of community rights originated from western influences. He said that the western concept of human rights placed emphasis on the rights of individuals. The Asian human rights concepts, on the other hand, recognized rights belonging to both the individual and the community. Being a resource-based country, the concept of human rights in Thailand was closely linked with the idea of "community rights. He said:

"Resource-based societies such as Thailand equate economic and social rights with self-reliance. In resource-based economies, people live on the available resources that they have. Therefore, building up the capabilities of people to develop their own resources, skills, technology and wisdom to keep up with the trends of changes in the modern world, is their human right."

The results of the researches on community rights were expected to provide the bases for a proposed national policy on local communities in accordance with the provision on Local Community Rights stated in the 1997 Constitution of the Thai Kingdom.

The Issue of Bio-diversity

When the research on community forestry was first broached, the prevailing idea was to promote the human rights of the rural people to carry on with their livelihoods, which was heavily dependent on the forest material resources. The strategy was to utilize the indigenous knowledge of the people to manage the tropical forests to allow them economic opportunities in a sustainable manner.

However upon closer study, Prof. Saneh's research group discovered what they referred to as "local wisdom". Before the idea of local wisdom came along, forestry referred to material resources needed by the rural people to earn income. Local wisdom, on the other hand, referred to knowledge expressed by local people through the practices of their daily lives. Local wisdom referred not only to material and tangible things but also to spiritual resources, which dealt with bio-diversity. Prof. Saneh concluded that there was a greater need to conduct researches on the implication of biodiversity to the local people. He then steered the first research in Thailand that looked on the issue of bio-diversity.

In 2000, the issue of bio-diversity had become a national concern. The Thai and US governments had come to an agreement for the setting up of Tropical Forest Conservation Fund that would undertake researches on bio-diversity. The proposed Fund would be generated through a debt-swap-for-nature plan between the two countries. Five percent of the debt owed by Thailand to the US would be written off and the money placed in a fund to support forest conservation efforts.

However, Prof. Saneh as well as other activists' voices expressed strong oppositions to the proposed agreement. Prof. Saneh Chamarik, now chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission, criticized the plan citing the fact that once the agreement was forged, the US would gain access to Thailand's tropical forests. The US could then draw information and resource materials for its pharmaceutical and food industries. Once this happens, it was believed that the local people would be used but left out in the development process.

Once again, the results of the previous researches made by Prof. Saneh were instrumental in advocating a case against the US – Thai Agreement on the establishment of the Tropical Forest Conservation Fund. As the public's opposition grew stronger, the Thai government was forced to back down from the agreement, even though the United States threatened to pull out stating that there would be other countries eager to take its money. After this initial success, Prof. Saneh and other leaders advocated for the declaration of a National Agenda for the Thais, a movement that rallied the general public to invest in Thailand's tropical forest research themselves. The main strategy of this movement was to increase awareness and concern of the Thai public on the issue of tropical forests.

It was hoped that this increased awareness would lead the Thai people to contribute financially to build up a tropical forest development fund. The reasoning was that if Thailand could take care of its own forests, the country would no longer need to open up its resources to the western world. That meant that the local wisdom possessed by the rural people, documented in the researches, would remain in Thailand. This effort would also ensure that the benefits derived from tropical forest researches would redound to the Thai people themselves.

Other Research – Based Advocacy

Prof. Saneh Chamarik continued to underscore the importance of applied research work in promoting rural development and to use the findings in these researches to advocate for his ideas. One of his advocacy projects involved encouraging urban residents to take part in rural development. In the rural development discourse, self-reliance was the operative word. In achieving self-reliance, Prof. Saneh believed that rural people by themselves could not manage to develop on their own because in the modern age, the capitalist system was still at work. In this system, it was believed that the big players or big companies were still the dominant actors. Thus, Prof. Saneh had been sounding the need for both the urban people and the business sector to participate in rural development. According to Prof. Saneh:

“Urban people have to do something to pay attention to what’s going on in the rural areas. The talents and experiences of middle class are needed to develop the skills and capabilities of the rural people. Urban people should be educated to accommodate the rural people.”

Towards this end, Prof. Saneh had urged the urban people to look at the rural areas as an alternative market. According to him, the “alternative market” is a concept which allowed the rural people to participate in the production-distribution-marketing-consumption process of the capitalist system.

Further, Prof. Saneh advocated for the dynamic participation to rural development to the Council of Thai Industry, a voluntary association of Thai industrialists. Through interaction with the members of this organization, Prof. Saneh had encouraged industrialists to pay more attention to the development and sustainability of the rural people when they make investments in the rural areas.

Through continuous dialogues backed by solid research results, he had forwarded to this group the idea of business ethics, which involved caring for the environment and the livelihood of rural people that were affected by their businesses.

Personal Background

Saneh Chamarik graduated with a law degree from the University of Moral and Political Sciences. He worked from 1950 to 1960 at the Political Department of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1953, he received a scholarship to study at Manchester University in England where he took up Public Administration. When he came back from England, Thammasat University asked him to join as a faculty in political science and thus started thirty years of his academic career.

He occupied various positions at different times during his tenure at the University such as Vice-Rector of TU (1975 – 1976), President of the Social Science Association of Thailand (1982 – 1985) and Chairperson of TU’s Thai Khadi Institute. Since 1985, he has been a Trustee of the Thailand Development Research Institute. He is also Vice Chairperson of the Local Development Foundation.

A well-respected figure and a household name among the Thai intellectuals, Prof. Saneh had published several books some of which were “Buddhism and Human Rights” (1979), “Some

Thoughts on Human Rights Protection – Thai Politics and Education” (1980) and “Thai Politics and Constitutional Development” (1983).

Presently, he is the Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, where he is actively advocating the idea of “community rights” of people living in forestlands. Prof. Saneh Chamarik was born in 1927 and that makes him older than Thailand’s democracy. The challenges he had overcome and the achievements he had reaped all reflect the social, cultural and political changes that characterized Thailand’s modern history.

At a time when Thai academics were fiercely debating on how much they should get involved in politics and social activism and how to maintain their academic objectivity, Prof. Saneh was already involved. As a lecturer at Thammasat University’s Faculty of Political Science, he closely observed the popular uprising on October 14, 1973 and experienced the violent crackdown on prodemocracy activists on October 6, 1976.

He was also credited as one of the conscientious voices, together with Prof. Rapee Sagarik and Ramon Magsaysay Awardee Prof. Prawase Wasi, which helped pacify and unite the Thai people after the shock of the “Black May” incident. The trio was regarded as the “three senior citizens”, a title of honor bestowed on them by the general public.

On Failures and Successes

Prof. Saneh’s career had spanned over fifty years of notable accomplishments yet the highly respected professor maintained that his life was one of failures. According to him, many of his earlier initiatives were terminated or at least failed to proceed according to his plans. He would often pioneer an idea but according to him very few would listen or believe that it was feasible at that moment because of the present environmental situation. Later on, even ten or twenty years later, he would be surprised to know that someone remembered or was advocating one of his ideas.

The soft-spoken man disclosed that it was quite difficult to pass judgment on the results of his work for the last five decades. This was because he believed that the issue of success and failure of an individual was a process that cannot be neatly separated into compartments labeled as such.

Role Models

Reminiscing about his childhood, Prof. Saneh remembered two great influences in his life: “I grew up in the country. When my mother died at age 14, I came to live with my aunt in the city. I learned a lot from her, I learned sympathy, love, compassion.

“My experience with my aunt is sort of a kind of education for me – human education quite apart from academic and technical education. This should be a significant part of the education experience. Few people realize this. They always think of going to school, getting an education so they can get employment. This is the wrong kind of education.

Prof. Puey Ungphakorn was also a great influence to me. He taught me the virtue of a deep sense of integrity. He had no ambitions; rather, he worked for the benefit of all people.”

Prof. Saneh does not consider himself a great leader but remained every bit a teacher. This was reflected in his closing words when he said,

“Every time I speak or write, my wish is that the listener or reader or my fellow people would learn along with me. I don’t think I create anything new, I don’t think so, but I might have an advantage over others because I get paid to do the thinking job – reading, writing and thinking – this is quite an advantage. When you have the opportunity to learn, to be educated, you have (the duty) to pay back, you should create something so that other people would learn along with you.

Every educated person should realize this kind of obligation to fellow beings. Education is not something to get yourself rich or powerful, I don’t think so. You don’t live alone; you are part of a human community. Most people think only of themselves.”

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