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Title of Research (revised)

“Aid and the challenges of engaging with conflict: crisis in the far south of Thailand, international donors, and wider implications.”

Purpose of Research:

This research looks at how international aid agency assistance to Thailand has been configured to account for or address tensions in the far south of the country. In doing so, it analyses development conditions in the area and their relation to conflict. It then considers specific interventions to address the issue, and the conflict ‘sensitivity’ of wider programmes of support to Thailand. The aim is to improve international aid practice in ‘peripheral’ conflict settings.

The relationship between development and conflict is not straightforward beyond a very generalized perspective that more developed countries tend to be more peaceful. Development itself, especially rapid development, has long been associated with increased tensions both within and between states. This study looks at internal conflicts in peripheral areas of developing states. Many such conflicts have proved remarkably resilient, with violent uprisings in border areas of Indonesia, Thailand, China, India, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos and other states continuing for decades. They are often described as ‘ethno-nationalist’ conflicts.

When viewed from these peripheries, development may seem to be a major element of ‘internal colonialism’. Development policies regarded internationally as technical, universally beneficial actions such as extension of transport links or expansion of education systems are often undertaken by governments as intentional pacification projects, or as part of assimilation efforts often seen as key to building nations. Many conflicts cannot be usefully approached from a narrow economic perspective (as attempted by many analysts of conflict), given the significance of ethnicity and identity politics. Significant actors deciding the likelihood of violence include the form of political system and level of representation.

In countries where conflict appears to remain peripheral to the general national trajectory, most international development aid will not address it at all for various reasons. Donor countries are likely to consider other factors, including diplomatic or trade relationships, as more significant. Aid agencies themselves may be reluctant to get involved in an issue that will probably make their broader role harder rather than easier, and in any case from an office in the capital city a conflict may escape immediate attention. Governments will likely make it hard for any international engagement in an issue that affects national identity. Practical issues of understanding complex environments, negotiating space to operate, and spending funds efficiently will limit scope for engagement. Wider debate over ‘conflict sensitivity’ and other elements of peacebuilding engagement often gloss over these considerations, in addition to focusing on the specific programmes of a small set of ‘like-minded’ aid agencies and non-governmental bodies rather than the wider role of aid in contributing to the development trajectory of a country.

Content/Methodology of Research:

Methodology: This research has required an approach that recognises identity and ethnicity within a political economic framework. This follows the dominant trend of Thai studies, as well as almost all explanations of the reasons for conflict in the far South of Thailand. Ethnicity is treated as a flexible, constructed notion, rather than the essential or primordial vision of identity that underpins much nationalism and ethnonationalist protest. But a constructed ethnicity is considered significant in its own right as a factor, and not merely as a product of other processes.

Approaches to civil conflicts in development studies often rely on economic variables, or on an application of economic techniques to the field of political science. These approaches may have merit, but fail to account for the complexities of the formation of difference and identity. The significance of language, for example, can rarely be usefully reduced to indices of ethnolinguistic fragmentation.

The key method used involves semi-structured interviews with key informants. These focus on the donor level, interviewing international staff of a range of relevant aid agencies operating in Thailand as well as counterparts in government. Other figures interviewed included local NGO and government staff as well as a range of others in the conflict area. In all over 100 interviews were conducted, and reinforced with published and unpublished literature analysis, discussions and travel in the conflict area. It was possible to conduct an overview of the whole aid sector rather than selecting a representative sample. Use is made of relevant case studies. Use is also made of earlier professional experience in Aceh (Indonesia) and Sri Lanka.

Content (compiled from interviews and other research): After almost a century of tension in the far south of Thailand, violent conflict accelerated rapidly from early 2004, claiming several thousand victims since that date.

Statistically, the far south is one of the poorer areas of Thailand, but the significant issue is one of interpretation: perceived relative political, cultural and economic deprivation at the hands of an unjust and alien state is commonplace. Whilst people in the far South – as elsewhere – want to see better services and an improved economy, development is often seen in highly politicized terms. Development projects that have been successful elsewhere in Thailand have often achieved lower success rates in the far South. Furthermore, development has historically been used as a tool to ‘win’, rather than a means of tackling background causes.

For most of the history of foreign aid provision to Thailand, dominant donor practice has involved fairly straightforward application of aid in support of national modernisation. By the late 1970s, Japan and ADB had supplanted the USA and the World Bank as key donors, and their approach, with a continued strong dirigiste and managerial role for the state, continued. By the early 2000s, aid flows were much reduced, with Japan still maintaining a programme. In common with global policies of conflict reduction, some agencies attempted to promote peace or tackle background conditions in the far south through a range of small, varied interventions.

Asian Development Bank support for the Indonesia Malaysia Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT_GT) is selected here as an example of an internationally funded initiative that focuses on the far South of Thailand and aims directly at economic growth. It does not focus on conflict reduction in any direct way. The result has been, according to various accounts, increased development plans that polarize wealth in limited areas, fail to include the majority rural Malay population, and add to a perception of government as an alienating presence.

Some international agencies have tried to address conflict concerns in the far south. Shifting aid paradigms have promoted an increased focus on conflict, a critical view of the state, and stronger engagement with 'civil society' as a partner. Research focuses on two large agencies, UNDP and the World Bank. I argue that agencies' scope to engage is limited, as can be seen clearly at the interface between donor and government. UNDP and the World Bank have both attempted to set up programmes but have failed to make much progress, having been blocked by the government. At the same time, the rest of both organisations' limited portfolios of work in Thailand fail to 'mainstream' problems in the far South.

Some agencies have managed to engage. UNICEF has a range of interventions, the Ebert and Adenauer Foundations have backed some small initiatives, and the US government has supported several bodies including The Asia Foundation. Having relatively powerful backers appears to help. Several of these organizations also have a long track record of work in the far South, enabling careful, relatively long term interventions. In many cases the preferred local partner is a domestic Thai NGO. This does not avoid government involvement at all, but does provide another channel. But most of the positive interventions discussed are generally small scale, and an absence of decent evaluation makes it difficult to judge the impact of those initiatives that have taken.

Conclusion/Observation:

For decades, Japanese and other aid has supported centrally led growth and expansion of the state, with limited attention to the relationship between citizens and the state. The predominant 'statism' of most aid flows has various manifestations: technical view of the state as a provider of development; political support for the state as an ally; prioritisation of economic issues to the detriment of other factors more significant in fomenting violence; and institutional reliance on the state.

Almost all donors to Thailand stress the value of a 'partnership' with government. In this context, most donor aims over peacebuilding, human security, etc. are not shared by the initial agencies that donors engage with who see them chiefly as an unwelcome external threat to sovereignty. Japan has been particularly supportive of a 'partnership' approach for decades, and remains a favoured donor by central government as a result. However, it means efforts to modify aid to ensure it (at the very least) does not exacerbate conflict are unlikely, making it hard to turn policy statements over sensitivity to conflict into practice.

It is possible, but hard, for organizations already fortuitously situated to develop programming that addresses conflict-related issues in the far South, and with care to make a useful impact. With low global prioritisation of a conflict that is peripheral domestically as well as internationally, there is little incentive for most donors to engage in issues that make it harder to spend aid budgets. Unless a conflict is so severe that it damages normal processes of aid delivery, most aid agencies are not incentivised to ensure that their work even 'does no harm', let alone actively aims to build conditions conducive to peace. Comparative experience – for example during reconstruction after the 2004 tsunami in conflict-affected Aceh, or with aid assistance to Rwanda since the 1994 genocide – confirms this finding. The interface with government is central to how donors operate, and at the policy level strengthening the state has recently re-emerged as a key aspect of aid objectives. Since a majority of conflicts involve states as actors, and in almost all cases states are part of viable solutions, this limits international scope to engage through the use of development aid.

Careful approaches do enable engagement in many cases, especially where the state is seen in its full complexity and allies are chosen from within different elements. But conceptually neat expectations that aid can help build responsive states as part of human security or conflict-sensitive development approaches will not be met. In particular, the significance of the relationship between external and internal actors in shaping aid delivery and subsequent impact is under-played.