

‘Sustainable Livelihoods Framework’ Just Survival Not Sustainable: A Case Study of the Returning Thai Diaspora in Thai Society

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Abstract: This study is intended to debate the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) developed by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom. Qualitative data were collected via in-depth interviews, observations and small group discussions. Key informants consisted of household heads of the Returning Thai Diaspora (RTD) as well as senior members of the RTD who are familiar with the history of the diasporic movement, the mainstay of the RTD network, household heads of ordinary Thai families who live in the same community and both government and non-government officers involved in the research areas in Prachuap Khiri Khan and Ranong Provinces. The study found that for the RTD, five kinds of capital under SLF are ‘limitations’ rather than ‘opportunities’ in formulating their livelihood strategies because lack of rights and power is a major problem for those who do not have citizenship. Rights and power are part of the political capital needed by the RTD to enable them to transform assets/resources into various kinds of capital for their livelihood strategies. Therefore, political capital is crucial for the RTD to have access and command over their livelihood capital/assets according to the concept of ‘capability’ that is integrated in SLF. Reducing the limitations of livelihood capital accessibility in Thai society allows some of the RTD to survive but they still cannot achieve the ultimate SLF goal of sustainability. However, when a group of RTD worked together as a network to restore Thai nationality, they created a process of political capital accumulation that enabled their livelihood strategies to achieve the ultimate goal of ‘sustainability’ and the negotiation through which their human rights in Thai society were recognized.

Key words: Sustainable livelihoods framework, Thai diaspora, political capital, entitlement, re-rooting

INTRODUCTION

The livelihood concept which appeared in the late 1990s is used to explain capabilities related to the adjustment for survival of those living in rural society. It helps open perspectives, alternatives and opportunities not exclusively related to land-based production relationships. It emphasizes the capacity to access and change capital/resources for livelihoods. This concept is useful for studying the issues of poverty and livelihoods of people in vulnerability contexts. It is used as a guideline for analyzing the actors’ perspectives on environmental conditions, selves and the dynamics of processes related to them. It helps us understand the complexity of poverty and the problems caused by past development.

Economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi viewed development from a ‘substantive economic’ perspective that aims to understand the economic and marketing system and applied the basic economic resources that

people have for livelihood management. Consequently, unlike mainstream economic concepts that address only the behavior of individuals and exclude social relationships, economics was made holistic and human-centered.

Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway explored and elaborated the concept of sustainable livelihoods in the 21st century. The objective of this concept focused on policy and research because the conventional concepts lagged behind practice, experience and cutting edge ideas. There were gaps and weaknesses in the linkage between different disciplines. People need practical concept cross-linkages between ecology, economics and social sciences which are useful for analysis, practice and decision-making. Therefore, the three concepts of capability, equity and sustainability are linked together and present a framework for development thinking. ‘Capability’ has been used by Amartya Sen to refer to certain basic functioning that a person is capable of and able to find and make use of livelihood opportunities.

‘Equity’ can be measured by a less unequal distribution of assets, capabilities and opportunities. ‘Sustainability’ connotes the ideology of long-term self-restraint and self-reliance which focuses more on the ability to maintain and enhance the assets and capabilities on which livelihoods depend. Thus, long-term perspectives should apply to all policies with sustainable livelihood as the objective for present and future generations (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Chambers, 2004). For example, the definition of ‘livelihood’ based on the ideas of Chambers and Conway (1992) is mainly used:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future while not undermining the natural recourse base (DFID, 1999)

The livelihood concept was developed out of academic works in different disciplines and consists of three main types: livelihoods case studies the studies are focused on livelihood strategies of a particular group of people living in a particular environment, theoretical studies influential contributions in a border scope and policy framework developments of analytical frameworks for policy interventions. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), developed by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) is an important example of this concept in practice as shown in Fig. 1.

SLF is a tool to improve our understanding of livelihoods. It can be used in both planning new development activities and assessing the contributions to livelihood sustainability made by existing activities (DFID, 1999). The key objective is to strengthen people’s livelihoods by promoting their capitals to cope with and recover from socio-environmental stresses and shocks, improving their living situation and contributing to poverty reduction and sustainable human development. In this sense, SLF looks not only for ways to survive but also for people’s ability to succeed and move forward in a sustainable manner.

The SLF is a policy-based framework that focuses on five kinds of capital for formulating livelihood strategies, i.e., human, social, physical, natural and financial capital (DFID, 1999). However, it does not focus on powers and rights as people’s capital for making a living. This study argues that ‘political capital’ should be considered an important capital for sustainable livelihoods. Including it with the other kinds of capital would encourage policy makers to be more aware of powers and rights as critical issues of people in vulnerability contexts such as the RTD whose members are negotiating their status in Thai society.

Therefore, people in vulnerability contexts who have access to livelihood capitals/assets or resources may ‘survive’ but not enough to ‘sustain’ their livelihoods. This argument can be explained by the concepts of ‘entitlement’ and ‘capability.’ Sen in discussing entitlement, concentrates on the determination of command over commodities and other kinds of capital including food. He views famine as arising not from a lack of availability of food but from a lack of command over food (Sen, 1984). As for ‘capability’ to solve the problem

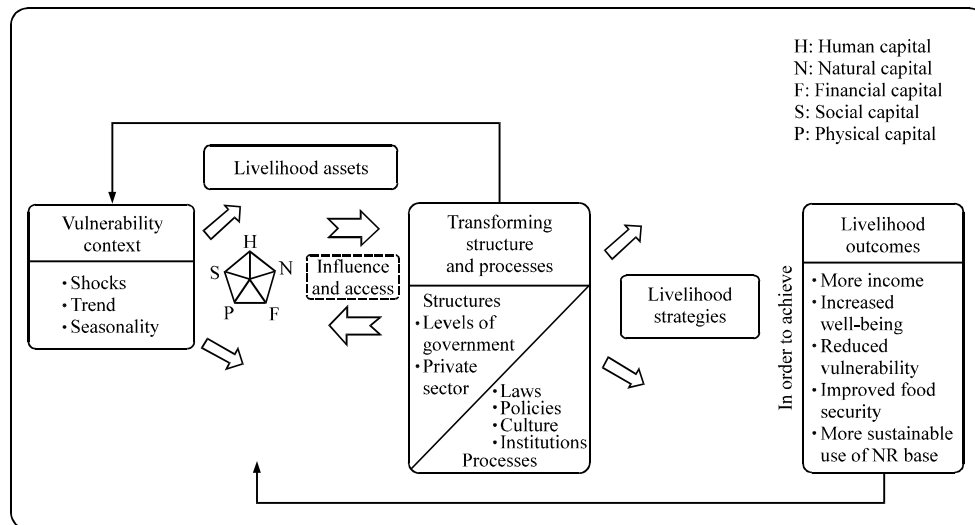


Fig. 1: Sustainable Livelihoods Framework: SLF (DFID, 1999)

of poverty, the poor must have the ability to use assets or resources to create benefits for themselves and their families (Sen, 2005).

Another relevant concept is Karl Marx's 'alienation,' according to which people, when deprived of their sense of human nature can create nothing. Although, Marx was concerned primarily with capitalistic societies stratified into social classes, the concept is relevant in the present situation. If humans cannot 'do' anything freely but only eat, drink, have sex, live, dress up, etc., their functions are not different from those of animals and they share with them the aspect of survival (Marx, 1988).

People within vulnerability contexts require livelihood capitals which they can convert into positive livelihood outcomes for both the present and the future. SLF identifies five core types of capital which people can build up and draw upon (DFID, 1999). Political capital is not included as an endogenous asset. Yet, it is one of the key capitals on which people draw to build their livelihoods and also one of the key constraining factors on sustainable livelihoods. Political capital is important because policies, institutions and processes aim to change the 'structure'.

By analyzing livelihood strategies, one may focus on the way people cope with ecological disasters, economic and political adversity, effects of resettlement and processes of social-security mechanisms, diversification and problems of sustainable livelihoods. The livelihood approach is useful for studying poverty issues as well as environmental issues and for exploring actors' perceptions of the environment of themselves and of the dynamics and processes they are involved by Kaag. People have used various types of capital assets to adjust to new environmental and economic contexts and form various strategies that have enabled them to survive (Janmanee and Thongyou, 2012).

The research upon which this study is based examined livelihood strategies of the RTD by focusing on their choices of utilizing various types of capital for their livelihoods. It also explored the necessary capital for the RTD to build livelihood strategies which yield positive livelihood outcomes. The RTD are perceived by the Thai state as the other, therefore, following operational guidelines, the Thai state also treats them as the other. This 'structure', consisting of discriminating laws, policies, regulations, announcements and governmental mechanisms, suppresses them. Consequently, the RTD are in vulnerability contexts in which they need to formulate livelihood strategies to convert their capitals/assets into positive livelihood outcomes. For example, they must cope in the short term and recover in the long term with limited access to livelihood assets and

citizenship rights in Thai society. However, their choices of utilizing necessary 'capital' for positive outcomes may be different from those of Thai's in general.

The case study

The Returning Thai Diaspora (RTD): The 1868 demarcation of the modern border between British Burma and the Kingdom of Siam resulted in a Thai diaspora of >40,000 (both Buddhists and Muslims) in the Southern states of what is now the modern nation-state of Myanmar. Since the 1980s, the majority of these persons have moved back over the border into Thailand. Their status has become that of the RTD because they have not been granted Thai citizenship. Consequently, they lack the rights and power to access livelihood assets. The people of the RTD use a variety of means to establish themselves as subjects and citizens of the Thai state. They identify themselves as Thai who speak and write the Thai language, maintain Thai cultural practices, etc. However, the Thai government treats them as the other or 'persons who do not have Thai nationality.' Thus, they do not have legal rights to assets or the means of basic livelihoods. For example, they have no legal rights to own land, housing, vehicles, etc., they are not allowed to travel beyond provincial boundaries and their children cannot study at higher educational levels in Thailand (Phongsiri and Thongyou, 2013). The RTD do not have any kind of political rights. Without Thai ID cards, they cannot be hired legally and being illegal workers, they are paid low wages and often are not even paid. However, the RTD have created livelihood strategies for surviving in Thai society and have made their voices heard many times.

The RTD are part of the stateless people in Thailand. Thus far, the Thai state in dealing with them has not yet established a clear policy. The new Nationality Act (Version 5), 2012 C.E., added the definition of Thai diaspora as separate from other aliens or minority groups and therefore the RTD can be granted Thai nationality by birth but not by naturalization (Phongsiri and Thongyou, 2013). They will have the opportunity to earn their 'political capital' after living with legal obstacles and oppression for a long time. Some problems remain concerning the Interior Ministry's regulations that serve as guidelines for implementation by relevant governmental organizations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The majority of RTD who were the target groups of this study settled down in the provinces close to their former communities in the Tenasserim Division and the Thai-Myanmar border. Qualitative research was

conducted using the case study approach. Qualitative data was collected via in-depth interviews using an interview guideline, participatory and non-participatory observations and small group discussions. The case studies were 30 households of the RTD and 94 key informants consisting of the following: the Thai diaspora (in Myanmar), the senior RTD who know about the history of the diasporic movement, the mainstay of the RTD network, household heads of ordinary Thai people who live in the same community, the local administrative organization staff and both government and Non-Government (NGOs) officers involved in the research areas. Key informant selection was based on the procedures proposed by Yin (2003) in selecting the cases which incorporate the specific reasons of a particular group of cases. Therefore, the case studies were purposely selected to represent various RTD livelihood strategies. To analyze the data, this research classified information of the target groups into three levels household, community and network to interpret how they had taken advantage of debates on their status vis-a-vis the Thai state, their political mobilization in Thailand and their development of livelihood strategies. The data was collected from April 2011 to April 2013. The study covered two diaspora communities in two provinces: Buddhist RTD in Prachuap Khirikhan and Muslim RTD in Ranong. These areas are indicated on the map (Fig. 2).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The RTD has been recognized since, the Thai government sponsored the Social Investment Fund (SIF) for poor people in 2002. Some NGOs worked closely with poor people in Ranong Province, promoting saving schemes and recruiting members with ID cards. But, many poor people had neither ID cards nor any other documents identifying them. After being interviewed, they became known as part of the RTD or as one of the groups of stateless people who have lived in Thai society for a long period of time. After the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the Southern part of Thailand in 2004, this RTD became more widely recognized. Many people affected by the disaster including those belonging to the RTD could not receive any help from social welfare agencies or NGOs because they did not have ID cards or any other documents of identification. Subsequently, the situation of the RTD became known to Thai society after their story had been disseminated by mass media. Most of members of the RTD in Prachuap Khiri Khan are Buddhists, live on land near the Myanmar border and so their livelihoods depend on natural capital across the border from Myanmar and continued business and employment. Most of members of the RTD in Ranong are Muslims, live by the sea near the Myanmar border and so their livelihoods depend on marine fishery resources. Nearly, all livelihood strategies of the RTD in both research areas are limited because of Thai legal prohibitions.

Although, the RTD identify themselves as Thai, speak and write the Thai language, maintain Thai cultural practices, etc., the Thai government treats them as 'the other' or as 'persons who do not have Thai nationality.' Thus, they do not have legal rights to assets or the means of basic livelihoods. For example, they have no legal right to own land, housing, vehicles, etc. and they are not allowed to travel beyond the borders of their residential provinces. Moreover, they do not have any kind of political rights. Without Thai ID cards, they can only work in 'informal sectors' such as non-contracted labor, fishing crews, wooden (tree stump) furniture makers, merchants at border markets, fishermen, boat-builders, shrimp peelers, NTFP collecting, etc. They cannot be hired legally and being illegal workers, they are paid low wages and often are not even paid. However, they have created livelihood strategies for surviving in Thai society and have also voiced their problems many times. An RTD elder remembers having a peaceful, happy and resourceful life in the past.



Fig. 2: Map of research areas

Table 1: The RTD's having or accessing of livelihood activities/resources in Thai society

SLF capitals	RTD's having or accessing
Human capital	Household members: those of the older generation may not be different from other members. But the younger people are encouraged to marry Thai citizens in order to gain citizenship for their children and seek those who can be livelihood asset owners, etc Occupations: the RTD are not allowed to travel beyond provincial borders either for work or study. Consequently, most of the people work as local laborers in construction, fishing, or in factories and some are merchants at local markets. In this sense, 'labor' is the source of livelihood Health: before 2010, they could receive health services from the Thai government but had to pay in full for treatment. Since, the beginning of 2011, only the registered RTDs have received free primary health care approved by the government year by year and only in the provincial boundary areas where they live. This support has resulted from their efforts to make their voices heard Education: they are not allowed to travel beyond provincial boundaries, so while their children can study at the local primary and secondary school levels with the ordinary Thai students, they cannot study at higher educational levels in other provinces and cannot receive special support from the government such as student loans, educational tours, etc.
Natural capital	Access to land: they cannot legally own land. Consequently, some engage in agriculture on small plots rented from landlords and some go to do farming across the border in Myanmar Natural resources: include fishery resources from canals and the sea. The majority of natural capital brought from Myanmar includes wood (tree stumps), orchids, bamboo shoots, marine fishery resources, etc.
Social capital	Networks: previously, the wat was the center of their social connections. Now, networks are considered key factors upon which the RTD draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives. These include networks and relationships that increase people's trust and ability to work together and link to other capital assets which can assist in increasing well-being. They also include memberships in local associations and networks such as savings groups and the network for solving the problem of Restoring Thai Nationality (NSPRTN). However, social capital is limited because of the inability to travel beyond provincial boundaries
Financial capital	Credit and saving: for sources of finance and credit, the RTD access financial capital through social capital. They organize credit and savings schemes by themselves because they cannot partake of bank services. Savings groups are the channels and core activities that encourage participation, collaboration and connection among RTD communities
Physical capital	Assets ownership: the RTD cannot own livelihood assets which require certificates of ownership such as a house, car, motorbike, etc. Again, social capital is the key factor for overcoming this limitation. They must trust and let their kin, relative, son/daughter-in-law or even a neighbor who has citizenship be the owner of these assets. Consequently, they cannot transform their assets into other kinds of livelihood capital such as financial capital, etc. Infrastructure and facilities: they can use these facilities together with Thai people in their communities as physical capital for achieving their livelihood outcomes. But they have no right to petition when they face infrastructure problems. For example, the community water supply was damaged for almost 2 years, so they had to buy water for 1,500 baht from a truck carrying water instead of paying only 30 baht a month from the community water supply committee

In the old village, we were happy because we had everything—herds of cows and buffalo, hundreds of elephants, wide farmlands, huge wild animals that we could hunt, etc. Life was full of resources there and we had so many assets from selling domestic and wild animals to Thailand.... The Thai diaspora (in Myanmar) built big houses and had gardens close to the river; they didn't live clustered together as they do now. But everyone knew each other because every Buddhist day, they would gather at the wat (the community temple). The wat was the center and the mechanism of connecting with each other. Here (in Thailand), we can build only small impermanent houses because we have no right to own land. Previously, we owned gardens so we hired Burmese laborers to work on our gardens. Now, we work as non-contracted laborers or on fishing crews; this is something we have never done before (Key informant interview, RTD who had moved from Myanmar to Thailand in 1974)

The story above helps us understand in a concrete sense the term 'uprooting.' The people's livelihoods have

been totally changed from a life full of resources to one in which they have virtually nothing. The choices for formulating livelihood strategies of the RTD are different from those of Thai people in general, constructed from processes that include multiple approaches to responding to contrasting needs. The livelihood strategies that the RTD use, based on their limited accessibility to capitals/assets and citizenship rights include those listed in Table 1.

For the RTD the five kinds of capital of the SLF scheme are 'limitations' rather than 'opportunities' to formulate their livelihood strategies because the RTD lack rights and power is a major problem. Livelihood strategies are defined as 'sets of activities' and 'diverse options or choices' which be combined and used to achieve their ultimate livelihood goal of 'sustainability.' The SLF does not include power and rights as an endogenous capital/asset of people in making a living. The arguments which the RTD made to the government are related to their nationality and citizenship rights. These arguments might also relate to capitals/assets identified in SLF. In case of the RTD, power and rights are critical problems for their livelihoods in Thai society:

Our main problem is lack of citizenship rights. Without Thai ID cards, it's very hard to deal with government officers, everything is difficult. We cannot own assets such as land, houses, motorcycles, etc. We cannot go to vote or be a candidate for election at any level or work in jobs related to national security such as being a soldier, police officer, lawyer, etc. (Key informant interview, RTD who moved from Myanmar to Thailand in 1974)

Limitations on RTD extend to the ability to protect natural resources and the environment. The RTD have worked together with local NGOs to establish their network called NSPRTN, mentioned above. This network created the symbolic activity of 're-rooting' in their imagined homeland (Thailand) which is related to a sense of maintaining or enhancing natural capital:

The NGOs coordinated with the forestry officials to allow us to plant trees in the forest for the country's reforestation. All of the members of the RTD network in three provinces about three thousand people went there together to plant trees and we made a sign announcing that this forest was planted by the RTD not by the Burmese. But after the planting, the forestry officials did not allow us go to that forest to take care of the trees that we had planted (Key informant interview, the RTD who moved from Myanmar to Thailand in 1992)

The stories above reveal 'entitlement failure' as Sen explains it; for sustainability to be achieved, it is necessary to have not only availability of livelihood capitals/assets but also command over those livelihood capitals/assets. According to the case study of the RTD in Thai society, they cannot have 'command over' livelihood assets such as houses, lands, cars, motorcycles, etc., so they cannot converted these assets into livelihood capitals. Therefore, 'political capital' is the endogenous capital that helps the RTD have 'command over' their capitals/assets for livelihoods, especially among the people in vulnerability contexts who are stateless groups in Thai society. In this sense, the livelihood strategies of the RTD may allow them to 'survive' but not enough to achieve significant outcomes of the strategy of 'sustainability' with restrictions on access to capital in Thai society.

CONCLUSION

The status of the RTD is no different from that of stateless people. They make a living under circumstances

in which they lack power and rights. They can be granted Thai citizenship by naturalization or transform their nationality from Burmese to Thai but they are still not complete Thai citizens. In this sense, 'political capital' is critical in their livelihoods. The ideas of SLF may be helpful through building on rights and power issues. This thinking should help us understand ways in which existing power structures affect the livelihoods of different groups as well as how we can best assist people in vulnerability contexts to claim their rights and begin to play a more active role as citizens and decision makers. However, this study has argued that it is important to also consider 'political capital' as an endogenous capital/asset in SLF. Doing so may encourage policy makers to be aware of 'power and rights' as a critical issue of people in vulnerability contexts such as the RTD. Merely having or accessing five kinds of livelihood capital according to the SLF Model is not sufficient for achieving significant outcomes of sustainable livelihood strategies. People in vulnerability contexts also need 'command over' their capitals/assets in their livelihoods.

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