

Perspectives on the Role of Higher Education in Relation to Thai Farmers

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Abstract

While Thai higher education has sought to facilitate social mobility for local Thai farmers who are among the poorest in the country, the socio-economic status of farmers seems to be in decline. This study explores the perspectives of scholars and notable farmers in regards to the role of higher education within the context of Thai farmers seeking qualitative data to answer the question “What has higher education done to enhance life quality for local farmers?” Eight participants were interviewed for this qualitative study. Two participants are notable farmers, one is a local activist in northern Thailand, and the rest are academics researching in this field. Two themes emerged from these interviews:

- 1) There is a lack of attempts to understand lived experiences of local farmers by institutions of higher learning; and
- 2) Thai higher education has been dominated primarily by Western ideology/modernity which further complicates the lives of local farmers.

Keywords: *Higher education, Thai farmers, social mobility, genealogy of knowledge, modernity*

Introduction

There are numerous studies on Thai farmers, their economic situations, and their livelihood, but not much has been done by Thai academics on the role of higher education in comparison to Thai farmers. While statements were made on this relationship, they are mostly brief. Most studies explore issues related to the economy and policies as methods to bring about better living conditions for farmers. However, exploration of the connection between higher education and local Thai farmers could provide significant insights as higher education seeks to transform the lives of local farmers. Thai farmers represent more than a quarter of the entire national population, and they are among the poorest in the country according to the 2013 Agricultural Census (National Statistics Office, 2013). One of the well-established means for changing socio-economic status is through higher education (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Sturgis & Buscha, 2015). The initiative to raise the standard of living for Thai farmers started with the 1st National Economic and Social Development Plan in the early 1960s (Wyatt, 2003; Baker & Phongpajit, 2009; Winichakul, 2010). This research seeks perspectives from academics and notable farmers on the role and functions of higher education in relation to Thai farmers.

Related Studies

While experts’ opinions in general suggest inadequacy of the system within higher education when addressing the needs of Thai peasants, there are pockets of academics in educational institutions across the country conducting significant studies and implementing meaningful projects. Ordorika and Lloyd (2015) call this group “the subaltern” as the force of resistance within higher educational institutions.

Selected academics who are researching the lives of local Thai farmers include Chiangtong, Sukansri, Rankchat, and Jaipinta (2013) of Chiang Mai University, who conducted a study exploring the rural living of agriculturists and the use of labor among landless farmers. The research located three villages in Chiang Mai and Lumpoon: Ban Pong, Ban Mo and Ban Chetwan. Sixty survey forms were distributed per village followed by in-depth interviews. The study shows transitions among local farmers from an agrarian to a more industrial system. This change leads to greater instability among

farmers resulting in more diversified entrepreneurial activities and below average income levels of farmers. The study suggests three annual income levels: 1. 10,000 to 50,000 Baht (US\$ 300–1,600), 2. 50,000 to 100,000 Baht (\$1,600–3,000), and 3. 100,000 to 500,000 Baht (\$3,000–16,000) per household in equal distribution; about 63 percent of the population is in debt. As a result of being integrated into the global economic system, the structure of these communities is changing from agricultural to economic units. Fueled by the global economy, fundamental structural changes in farming methods have resulted in the production of cash crops. The meaning of labor has shifted significantly. This domino effect impacts land ownership, cost of living, cost of production, loss of land, and much more. In their recommendations, the following policies were suggested as means of facilitating better living conditions for farmers: a well-functioning irrigation system for small farms, land reform, title deeds for the use of farm land, participation by local farmers in the production of agricultural goods, formation of groups among those working with contract farming in order to increase negotiating power, benefits for farm laborers, provision of health care benefits for migrant workers, a village fund for everyday living expenditure, and an educational fund since education involves hidden cost even with free mandatory education for the first 12 years.

Vaddhanaphuti and Wittayapan (2011) of Chiang Mai University edited a volume entitled *Revisiting Agrarian Transformations in the Greater Mekong Sub-region: New Challenges*. After reflection on case studies under the trend toward re-agrarianization from Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, they conclude that these case studies

“. . . have less to do with re-agrarianisation. . . and more to do with repositioning of agrarian relations within much wider, delocalized processes than hitherto experienced or hitherto recognized. Whether it is the repositioning of agriculture in a liberalized but re-regulated set of trade arrangements, the self-regulation of agriculturalists to meet new consumer demands for food safety and quality, the seizing of opportunities from adversity among those displaced by rural infrastructure, the adoption of parallel craft and other non-agricultural opportunities in order to keep rural livelihoods viable, the challenging of state conservation-based exclusions in the context of abuses by local powers, or simply the taking up of opportunities when state policy moves from anti- to pro-market policies, farmers are adapting their livelihood in both reactive and proactive ways in response to changes and social preferences that have their origins outside agrarian society.” (Hirsch, 2011: 187-188)

Nartsupha and his team have been conducting research related to community culture for the past few decades. His early research on farmers and community culture, *The Thai Village Economy in the Past* (1999), remains a classic. Nartsupha’s research continues to evoke the need to embrace agrarian culture and economic system as effective methods in facing the current economic crisis in rural Thailand. Jaitieng (2003) of Rajabhat University – Kalasin documented the transition of farmers in the northeastern region within the complex tension between community culture and the push toward capitalism. Jaitieng observes the existing tension of the preservation of local culture and the need to adapt to the increasing demands of capitalist ideology in rural Thailand. Farmers strive for freedom, equality and truthfulness. As a culture, ambition is not part of their discursive practices due to their belief in karma. While they submit to authorities, they have the courage to resist inequality and the abuse of power.

Garnchanapan, Professor in the Department of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, has published numerous studies on the struggles of farmers in both the northern and the northeastern regions of Thailand, and he is a well-known figure in land rights, indigenous rights and resource management. Taotawin of Ubon Ratchatani University, a graduate of Chiang Mai University, has conducted a number of studies regarding the lived experiences of local farmers in the region. In her research, “Contesting Meanings in Organic Agriculture and the Shifting Identities of Organic Growers in Thailand” (2011), she argues that organic farms originated as an alternative to commercial farms in the late 1970s. However, in the 1990s, the government policy shifted organic farms toward exports focusing on efficiency and standardization. The goal shifted from agrological ideals to production for market consumption. As a result, the focus on Sufficiency Economy has been neglected and replaced

by commercialization and internationalization. Another study was conducted by a graduate of Chiang Mai University named Thitiya Lao-an (2010) of Rajabhat University – Loei. She researched changes taking place among farmers in Kugasing, Roi Et. In her study entitled *Economic Changes of the 'Peasant Society' in Isan (Northeast) Region, from 1957-2007: A Case Study of Kugasing Village, Roi Et Province*, she traced changes that took place in the village around 1977 when modernization came to the village. Capital started to flow into the village, changing ways and methods of farming. Three groups of farmers were identified: low-income, medium-income, and high-income. High income farmers, because of the size of the field and their capital, were able to continue farming. Middle-income farmers, while continuing to work the field, found other jobs outside of agriculture as well. Low-income farmers provided labor for other farmers.

In stating the current condition of local Thai farmers, Liemcharoen (2011) described how Thailand remains one of the leading agricultural exporters, and yet the quality of life among Thai farmers is declining with increasing debts. Since 2002, approximately 300,000 to 400,000 farmers registered for special government loan funds established to assist farmers, and their accumulated debt amounts to one hundred billion Baht. Of the total number registered, 100,000 are on the brink of losing their land. It is estimated that 59.73 percent of farmland is being rented out to farmers for cultivation. According to a survey in 2004, there were 889,022 landless individuals; 517,263 farmers were in possession of land, but the land size was not sufficient for their survival; therefore, 811,279 farmers were working on properties without title deeds. The primary causes of farmers' dilemma are: the cost of chemical fertilizer, genetic modified seeds under the monopoly of major corporations, free trade policies, and the lack of meaningful participation by local farmers pertaining to issues that affect their livelihoods. Liemcharoen (2011) proposed the following reforms: offering land reform that will give rights of ownership to local farmers and therefore reduce the level of debts, changing the form of production from current practices that force dependency on chemical fertilizer and insecticides to organic farms, taking advantage of biological diversity to enhance production, encouraging research and utilization of technology that can enhance farming, encouraging production of food for internal consumption instead of mass production for exports, and promoting policies dealing with food security and sufficiency at the national level.

These are some examples of academic involvement in research related to Thai farmers. As stated earlier, not much is stated regarding the role and functions of higher education in facilitating better living conditions for local farmers. In light of the mandatory basic educational requirements and the rapid expansion of higher education as one of the means to address the living condition of those on the margin, how have farmers, as one of the primary recipients of development, been impacted?

Methodology

A qualitative method, grounded theory, is the primary focus of this study. Selection criteria for participants in this study include: academics or notable practitioners who have extensive experience through researching topics related to farmers/marginalized populations, working with local farmers, and/or understanding the lived experiences of Thai farmers.

A total of eight individuals who fit this category participated in the interviews, as shown below in Table 1. Their names and areas of expertise were identified through literature reviews and other referrals. Two of the practitioners were recommended based on many decades of experience in the field of agriculture and are well acquainted with the lives of farmers. The first participant is a professor of sociology and anthropology at Chiang Mai University who has published extensively on Thai studies and the living conditions of local farmers. The second participant is an instructor at Rajabhat Loei (Khon Kaen Campus) who conducted extensive research on the lives of farmers in Ku Ka Sing sub-district, Roi Et Province. The third participant works at Ubon Ratchatani University. She has both published on the topic of Thai farmers and worked on projects to enhance the living situations of local farmers. The fourth participant is a notable practitioner who lives in Buri Ram with more than 600 rai

of land. He is nationally recognized in the field of agriculture and is identified as one who promotes local wisdom, a popular guest lecturer in various academic institutions and governmental organizations.

Table 1. *Academic Researchers and Reputable Practitioners*

No. According to Sequence of the Interviews	Location	Academic/Practitioners	ID Code
1	Chiang Mai	Academic	ACM1
2	Khon Kaen	Academic	AKK1
3	Ubon	Academic	AU1
4	Buri Ram	Practitioner	AB1
5	Chiang Mai	Activist	ACM2
6	Chiang Mai	Practitioner	ACM3
7	Bangkok	Academic	ABK1
8	Bangkok	Academic	ABK2

The fifth participant is a Catholic priest and an activist promoting sustainable ecology among local farmers. He was among the first who initiated conversations on the concept of community culture back in the 1970s. The sixth participant is a nationally recognized farmer known for conservation of seeds and methods in building mud houses in Mae Tang, Chiang Mai. The seventh participant is a retired professor of economics, Chulalongkorn University, a well-respected scholar who has dedicated most of his life to the study of local farmers and community culture. The last participant is a retired professor of sociology and anthropology at Thammasart University. He is listed among prominent thinkers in Thailand and played a significant role during mass student demonstrations in October 1974. Six of the eight participants are well-known national figures as scholars, activists or agriculturists. Five of the eight interviews lasted 2 hours. The rest were shorter interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in three separate time frames for three of the participants.

The questions the data seek to answer are as follows: What has higher education done for farmers? What is your perception of the current status of local Thai farmers? What are your concerns about ways in which higher education addresses the needs of farmers and the marginalized population?

After the recordings were transcribed into text, the coding process started. "Coding," according to Charmaz (2006) means, "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (43). Coding of the interviews was done in two stages. The first level was line by line, identifying participants' ideas and opinions. In the second stage of coding, main ideas were grouped together forming concepts while at the same time organizing them into categories and subcategories. The constant question posed while working on emerging themes was, "What do the participants really wish to convey in contrast to possible interpretations of the texts?" When themes became more stable, they were triangulated with academics in the following three disciplines: higher education, lived experiences of farmers, and research methodology.

Themes

To the question what has higher education done for Thai peasants, all participants expressed that attempts on the part of institutions in general have been mostly inadequate. Increased access

has only reached a minority of those on the margin. The educational system as a whole has failed to address the needs of local farmers. The qualitative data based on interviews show two emerging themes that help to explain why higher education has not been as effective. These themes are: 1) the lack of understanding of the lived experiences of local farmers by institutions of higher learning; and 2) the dominating discourse of Westernism/modernity permeating Thai higher education.

1. *Thai Higher Education and its Lack of Understanding of Local Farmers' Lived Experiences*

One very consistent statement regarding the problems of higher education in addressing the situation of local farmers is the lack of understanding and attempts to engage the lived experiences of local farmers in order to be better equipped to address their needs. This concern was expressed by six of the eight participants. A retired economics professor described how the educational system teaches everything else but the everyday living of local Thais.

“We do not know how they live, how they earn their living. We know nothing about local community culture...This type of knowledge is slowly disappearing. There is no course on everyday life of local communities. It does not exist. One day I took a Japanese professor to observe a community culture in Sakon Nakhon. We asked villagers to describe to us their ways of living and we took part in a religious ritual (Riak Kwan). The Japanese professor asked if this type of course is being taught at Chulalongkorn University. I told him, I do not think so.” (ABK1)

An academic from Ubon Ratchathani who has been working closely with local farmers expressed her opinion:

“The world of higher education and the world of farmers are two very distinct worlds. Higher education has alienated itself from the communities and live in a separate world. It is not as if the two worlds intersect. To what extent does higher education understand farmers, agriculturists, local communities? I dare say, very little. There might be some from the sociology department that do field work. But very few. It is almost in extinction. On the other hand, what can higher education offer farmers (pertaining to their livelihood)? Do we really know how to farm? Personally I think most of us know very little. We pretty much live in our own world. Farmers live in their world. Even regional colleges and universities do not serve the needs of local farmers.” (AU1)

Because of the lack of attempts at seeking a thorough understanding of farmers' life and cultural practices, the solutions are not in alignment with their concerns. What is lacking is not just the understanding of the living conditions but the ability to see farmers as subjects that do contribute to the body of knowledge regarding farming, living, and life itself. Allowing local voices to be a part of institutions of higher learning does not seem to exist. Farmers have become objects to be disciplined into the modern world and modern ways of being.

An agrarian worldview is a commonly held worldview among farmers. Within this worldview, nature is considered sacred. Communities work together collectively helping one another. Labor is not measured through a monetary system. Competition is a foreign concept, but not cooperation. The world is viewed through seasonal rhythms and not as a progressive linear path. Modernity has reset the mechanism of farming through machines and technology aiming for the greatest yields within a competitive system. From this perspective, nature is to be exploited. Hence, these are two very incompatible worldviews. However, modernity has become a dominant discourse claiming singularity of truth, and by so doing marginalizing all other forms of knowledge. Higher education, for the most part, has been on the side of modernity with the ultimate aim of modernization guided by the assumption that modern is not only better, but that it is the only possible way to move forward (ABK1, ABK2, and ACM2). Thus, farmers have been designated as poor and uneducated. An academic from the *Isan* region stated, “But farmers are not ignorant or lacking when it comes to the capacity to think for themselves. They are very smart (AU1)”. When government officers arrived with a plan to modernize farming methods, farmers do not always rigidly follow the designated steps. They are very innovative. They are selective based on their experiences. They will observe and find what works best

for them. Often it results in a more hybrid approach to agriculture, an integration between the modern and traditional methods. “We think that farmers are poor uneducated people who can be easily manipulated. But in reality, they learn to integrate new knowledge and adapt.” (AU1)

Because of the commonly held view that farmers are uneducated, higher education has consistently attempted to educate the ‘underprivileged’ about the modern world and economy in order to help them cope with changes. According to an academic in a public university in Khon Kaen, the rapid expansion of institutions of higher education has turned them into places that produce graduates serving the interests of industries. Higher education is producing labor that feeds the industrial system. As a result, the number of students in humanities and social sciences has dropped dramatically. “They do not see any value in learning how to become human.” (AKK1) Most students within Rajabhat’s system major in science, management, accounting, and hotel management because these majors offer promise for a better future than majoring in agriculture.

This observation implies ways in which higher education guides their students from agriculture to industries. Higher education, while seeking to offer a better future for less fortunate students, redirects them away from their roots as farmers and agriculturists. To become learned is to be educated out of farming and educated into the world of industries, technologies and corporations. The promise of a better future via higher education steers them away from their ancestral cultural heritage and livelihood. Within the new world that is made possible by higher education, individuals are taught to consume not just products, but signs that differentiate them from others. Signs can set them apart or raise their social status. Products are no longer just merely for consumption, but they have been imputed with signs and symbols filled with meaning pertaining to social hierarchy and the sense of self-worth (ACM1). But this social construction of ‘better’ is a classification based on modernity.

Some academics from the field of education recognize the need to take this population seriously if education is to be a channel of transformation. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2003), constantly warns educators of the oppressive nature of the banking model in education. Speaking of the banking model he states: “Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (62). Banking presumes that knowledge is a gift to be bestowed by the knowledgeable upon those who know nothing. It projects an absolute ignorance onto others. Their bodies and minds become the location where knowledge can be deposited, and the deposited knowledge pacifies them into accepting the dominant discourse, depriving them of creativity and critical thinking.

In exploring postcolonial challenges of education, Tikly (2009) speaks of the location of knowledge as a primary place of exploration. It starts with the recognition of the ‘other’ as a producer of knowledge. “It means recognizing the silences, gaps, and omissions within and between hegemonic and counterhegemonic systems of knowledge in order to unearth alternative ways of knowing the world” (41). There are a multitude of voices that need to be heard. And education needs to construct “a hermeneutics that makes it possible for the needs, aspirations, and practices of a community to be understood by another” (41). Within the context of Thai peasants, Nartsupha (2014) points out how the dominant discourse has always placed them in the category of the ignorant and uneducated. He urges that in order to move forward, their voices need to be heard, their culture to be appreciated, their ways of living to be honored, and their identity to be respected. The reason is that this often neglected population has rich resources and a wealth of wisdom that can offer significant contributions to our society (178).

2. The Influence of Modernity within Thai Higher Education

One possible reason higher education has not sought to gain a deeper understanding of local farmers might be because of modernity’s claim as the only legitimate source of knowledge. The endorsement of this knowledge has been reproduced through higher education as a means toward

modernization of Thailand. A social activist (ACM2) points out that often higher education takes modernity as the objective truth instead of one of many other possible constructs, of which an agrarian worldview remains another possibility. Every participant points to change taking place within the economic system that significantly impacted local farmers negatively. Two of the participants specifically identified the 1960s as pivotal during the leadership of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat and the 1st National Economic and Social Development Plan. Another significant time was the 1980s during the Green Revolution (ABK1, ABK2), whereby farmers were encouraged to plant eucalyptus and cash crops under the leadership of Prime Minister Kriengsak Chamanun (AKK1). The negative effects on farmers based on the 1st National Economic and Social Development Plan became very obvious in the lives of local farmers during the 1980s.

“Although capitalism came to Thailand as early as the reign of Rama IV, but the impact was significantly felt during Sarit’s era and the 1st National Economic and Social Development Plan. The United States and the World Bank exerted great influence during Sarit’s premiership. The United States was behind Sarit’s (administration) and the economy was greatly impacted, focusing on production for capital accumulation.” (ABK1)

This major change had modernization as its impetus. “By embracing modernization, we have come to identify ourselves as inferior, as an ‘under’ developed country” (ABK1). This development ideology formed a major part of the Thai educational system as well during this era. A retired sociology professor stated emphatically “Thai educational system is modernity, it is Westernism” (ABK2). When asked the extent to which Thailand’s higher education has been influenced by modernity, his response was, “Higher education in Thailand is the immediate outcome of modernity.” Modernity is not negative in itself except when it turns hegemonic, and that is exactly what has happened in Thailand. Modernity claims to be the only valid source of knowledge and progress, and hence it marginalizes all other forms of knowledge.

Through legitimization of this modern knowledge by higher education, farming methods have been radically altered and thus, the way of living of local farmers. This is another indirect impact of higher education on Thai farmers. Through modernization and the promotion of monoculture, subsistence farming was in decline (ACM1). The focus is now on maximization of production for the greatest possible profit. Farming is no longer for internal consumption, but the primary source of economic gain, exchanging crops for cash. “This has a devastating impact on the environment,” stated a notable farmer (ACM2) who has been promoting sustainable living in Mae Taeng. “Bio-diversification is the very foundation of nature and our environment. By promoting monoculture, we are slowly destroying our earth and the very source of production of our nutrients.” Within this context, life becomes very difficult for households with small pieces of land (AKK1). The idea of farmers working primarily in the rice field is no longer a reality. Due to the economic shift, farmers are forced to engage in various means to generate income such as providing labor, doing construction work, running a small grocery store, or plowing fields with their tractors (for wealthier farmers) for extra income. The definition of farmer itself has changed due to capitalism (AU1). To add on to the current situation, free trade is rubbing salt into the wound. The neo-liberal economic policy turns agriculture to agro-industry, and thus emerged the concept of contract farming. Contract farming gives the appearance that farmers own land and are in charge of their production, but in substance, they are nothing but laborers in their own fields. “In contract farming, farmers do not invest financially. Investments and resources come from corporations. Farmers invest their labor and at the end sell the products to corporations, who then deduct all expenses until in the end what they receive in return is nothing more than daily wages” (ACM1). In a sense, farmers are hired to work on their very own land (ACM1).

A well-known farmer moaned the loss of what once was:

“I grew up witnessing the beauty of biodiversity within our surroundings. This land used to be abundant with natural resources. But now nature is in decline. Twenty or so years of modernization and things are never the same. Things have changed 180 degrees within the past 20-30 years . . . we accept modernity indiscriminately without understanding the limits

or the possible effects of a 'modern understanding of agriculture.' Many changes came through the provincial office promoting modern knowledge of farming, which is monoculture (AB1).

Another rich cultural loss is the slow disappearance of religious rituals relating to rice planting. Traditionally before planting rice in April or May, farmers would participate in a religious ritual to honor the spirits of their ancestors. A certain piece of property called 'common property' is designated within every village. This sacred location belongs to ancestral spirits. However, changes in the economic system have resulted in a decline in participation by the younger generation who normally migrate to big cities for employment. Further, because the cultivation of land now utilizes more advanced technologies, the concept of the sacred is slowly being taken over by modernity. Sacredness is being replaced by efficiency and the ability to produce (AKK1). A well-known social activist in Chiang Mai makes a distinction between the two operating worldviews, farmers' and that of modernity. With emerging domination of modernity in Thailand, that which is sacred is slowly disappearing. The belief in the sacredness in nature has a strong preservative function that protects the environment from being exploited. When nature is treated as 'thou', respect leads to preservation, and this has been a strong tradition among farmers in an agrarian system. However modernity has systematically removed 'sacred' from nature, from the environment, and from everyday life, and such beliefs have been classified as superstition. Anything that lacks a scientific basis through scientific methods is not worth preserving. While in an agrarian system human beings are considered parts of nature itself, thus, modernity results in bifurcation. Nature is now treated as objects to be exploited for maximum production. According to this social activist, the Thai people used to call a river "mae nam" (mother of water) and earth "mae toranee" (mother of earth). However, the anthropomorphic designation has been dropped and now – without the mother prefix – water and earth can be bought and sold, abused and exploited (ACM2).

Modernity, according to this social activist, has separated mind from matter, spirit from the material world, and thus the natural world is viewed primarily as objects. He then cites professor Tu Weiming, a senior fellow of the Asia Center at Harvard University, who observes that "modernity is not wrong in itself, but wrong in its inability for human to experience in matter that which embodies the spirit" (ACM2). In modernity, materialism becomes the foundation for how one approaches the world deprived of the sacred. Transcendence has been exorcised from the natural world and the world is primarily natural resources waiting to be exploited for human consumption. The rate with which we destroy our natural environment is alarming and perhaps eschatological, moving toward the extinction of human species. "Modern science has no room for the sacred, but this is not so with quantum physics" (ACM2).

Modernity has been utilized in the name of development to change the world. Within development ideology, traditional belief systems are viewed as primitive, as outdated. Modern education promotes this assumption by asserting modernity as the core worldview without realizing the unavoidable destructive force of modernity within our communities. This is most obvious in the capitalist economy as the driving force of modern economies. Capitalism has significantly impacted the world of agriculture. First it was commercialization through the production of food, and then it became food that fed cattle for the market economy and finally for fuel. The speed of destruction through deforestation is unprecedented. The economics of modernity that have dominated our entire social system are unsustainable (ACM2). The solution is not merely how to redistribute wealth as promoted by neo-Marxist ideology, because it is still framed within the context of development ideology on the basis of modernity. It has to be more radical, a surgical intervention of sort that really places modernity in its place. This is the reason why it is important to reappraise the concept of community culture because villagers for generations and generations have been able to live in harmony with nature and maintain a sustainable life. There are aspects of their culture that are redemptive for our current society. Thus, it is important to reappraise and adapt their core beliefs for

modern society as possible solutions to our present crisis. "The very problem of higher education is the term uni-versity itself. It is 'uni' and not multi-versity" (ACM2).

The concern over the role of development as stated by participants is confirmed by other post-colonial scholars as well. According to Sardar (1999) and Rist (1997), the concept of development as an instrument for social change is itself Eurocentric. Tikly (2009) states, "the notion of 'development' is part of the Western 'religion of modernity.'" He further points out, "the unshakable Western view of progress and social change has roots in the European enlightenment . . . used in Western modernist thought to legitimize such disparate projects as liberalism, Marxism, fascism, and imperialism" (30). Interestingly the idea of development that has been translated into the context of gender languages as 'women in development' has traces of a modernist agenda written all over. The United Nations and the World Bank have been pushing the concept of rights mostly based on the dominant discourse, reinforcing a homogenous worldview by imposing a Western conception of women's empowerment focusing on individual rights and gender equality (Tikly, 2009).

But as Simmons (1997) observed, these development projects "flooded their land, destroyed their forests, separated children from parents and grandparents, divided men from women, and ridiculed their religions, philosophies and ways of life" (249). Connecting this to education, Tikly (2009) shows how development is rooted in Western episteme that "forms the basis for the structure and content of formal education around the world" (41). The legacies of colonialism, to Asher (2009), are embedded in our educational system, curriculum and methods of teaching. Hence the way to move forward may perhaps lie in recovering the heritage and history. Speaking of indigenous knowledge, Sardar (1999) writes:

"Resistance to Eurocentricism, and hence development, can only come from non-Western concepts and categories. The non-Western cultures and civilizations have to reconstruct themselves, almost brick by brick, in accordance with their own world views and according to their own norms and values. This means that the non-West has to create a whole new body of knowledge, rediscover its lost and suppressed intellectual heritage, and shape a host of new disciplines." (57)

Perhaps participants' concerns for local farmers are best captured in words of one of a well-respected farmer in northern Thailand who is known for sustainable living:

"Formal education has forced a limit on freedom for farmers by emphasizing specialization, specialization provides employment, and employment is converted into a monetary system. Monetary dependency favors quantification of its values. Quantification is bias toward those who have the potential for maximization. Thus, freedom decreases while dependency increases. Hence democracy is an illusion because as long as certain voices carry more weight than others, true freedom is called into question. Higher education at the moment serves corporations by training students to constantly be in compliance with the system that serves a few people running corporations. Hence, higher education is about employment, and employment is about cash flow that profits the elites.

At the core of life is diversification. Current educational and economic systems take away diversification by promoting monoculture agriculturally and metaphorically. That is how life gets terminated. Education needs to get rid of a core curriculum and offer diversified curriculums that are regionally informed. Villagers need to come together and decide how best to educate their children in order to live meaningfully within their communities and the natural environment. Farmers learn on a regular basis how to live with their lands and survive, solving problems and creating communities. Education, for farmers, is on-going through practice." (ACM3)

Conclusion

The lack of a thorough understanding of farmers' population within the context of modernity has much to do with modernity's claim of universality. Hence, the need to learn and get to know the population has no significant importance, since nothing can be added to the pool of knowledge from

those categorized as uneducated and primitive. As such, interventions through higher education are primarily prescriptive, attempting to replace one's worldview, believing that this knowledge is the most legitimate for the modern world.

The collective wisdom from academicians and practitioners seems to suggest the need to move toward diversification in higher education by acknowledging the legitimization of other forms of knowledge that has existed in Thailand for generations. And upon this basis, negotiation with modernity is needed in order to facilitate better living conditions for local farmers. This process of re-polycentralization of knowledge implies acknowledging their social status within society as well as no longer categorizing them as poor and uneducated. Hence by deconstructing modernity and legitimizing traditional heritage and wisdom, social mobility takes place for local farmers because now subsistence living is no longer the way of the primitives and local knowledge is no longer placed as a binary opposite within a philosophical location. Without deconstructing modernity, the possibility of legitimizing other forms of knowledge could hardly be achievable since the dominant discourse lays claims of its truth and superiority.

The primary intention for interviewing this population, as experts in the field, is to elicit their perspectives on the situation of Thai farmers and the role of higher education. The expressed collective concerns seem to center around the impacts of modernity and modernization. The emergence of modernization has created a different worldview vastly different from the traditional Thai agrarian worldview. Higher education, in facilitating modernization, plays an important role in the production of knowledge based on modernity. If higher education is to remain meaningful for local farmers, taking the time to really understand their cultural, social and philosophical contexts is imperative.

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