Human Security through a Thai Kaleidoscope:

Ideas, Situations, and Actions

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Executive Summary

Human Security through a Thai Kaleidoscope: Ideas, Situations, and Actions[1]

As one of the most open societies in the developing world, Thailand has made considerable gains and suffered great pains from globalization. Thai people join the international community in adopting a human security framework to re-evaluate their options and strategies in the borderless world.

Human security is not new for the Thais who have embraced related ideas such as basic needs, social capital, social safety net, and human development. Human rights and community rights are now enshrined in the 1997 "People's Constitution".

This by itself is an impressive development, given the predominance of "national security" since the Second World War through the Cold War and the Indochinese conflict, and the preoccupation with economic growth until only a few years ago.

A new institutional context conducive to human security emerged in late 1990s, marked by the economic crisis, the new Constitution and the 8th national development plan. Together, they set a new vision which is based on human rights, community rights, participatory democracy and decentralization, sufficiency economy, people-centred development, traditional wisdom and local heritage. "Human security" as "people's security" is part of the language of change at both the grassroots and policy levels. A symbol of change is the establishment of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security late this year.

A situation survey of food, environmental, economic, social, health, cultural and political security reveals that an effort to enhance human security in Thailand should emphasize the issue of access and control, based on the principle of human rights and community rights, to protect local communities and empower them to maintain and develop the sources of their security. Human security can be effectively and efficiently enhanced through a shared and supportive system that promotes solidarity among its members, values and makes use of a large range of flexibility and diversity to cope with risks and unpredictability in this increasingly complex world.

The way forward is to support social movements that have been expanding both in scope and strength under the new institutional context. These movements, i.e. natural resource based, sustainable agriculture, sufficiency economy, health reform, education reform, public media reform, political reform, have yield impressive results on the ground and at the policy level. By networking and sharing experiences, civic

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[1] The paper is prepared by Parichart Siwaraksa and Decharut Sukkumnoed for the Health Systems Research Institute.

and grassroots groups find themselves expanding the scope of their activities and spreading spillover effects, which cumulatively enhance overall human security.

The challenge for the government is to support this process, remove the institutional barriers, and firmly place "human security" in a public, not bureaucratic, sphere. This may start by fostering a meaningful and sustained multi-partite dialogue at national and local levels. Another significant task is to manage the macro socio-economic environment in a way in which the sources of human security are valued and protected, and the benefit is shared fairly, with priority given to the vulnerable and disadvantaged .

Finally, the government and the people must be fully alert of both the positive and negative impacts of globalization on human security, especially risks that are likely to be shouldered by those with the least coping capacity. While "globalization with a human face", a vision for a gentler and kinder globalized world has yet to be clearly defined, human security is a concept that holds a promise of cooperation. It needs to be shared, discussed, and embraced by all concerned for it to be a genuinely powerful force against fear and deprivation in this increasingly fragmented world.

Human Security through a Thai Kaleidoscope:
Ideas, Situations and Actions

Parichart Siwaraksa & Decharut Sukkumnoed[2]

Thailand is regarded as one of the most open economies and societies in the developing world. The country and its people have made considerable gains due to strong ties with the global system. These gains are not without pain, and they should be reassessed in the context of risks that Thailand and many other countries have encountered in the past decade.

Human security in the borderless world is therefore a crucial theme which the Thais and the international community need to explore and re-evaluate their options in the increasingly complex world.

1. Human Security: International Perspective and Related Concepts

1.1 Human security as "people's security"

Human security as "people's security", as opposed to state's territorial and military security, became part of international development dialogue since it was introduced in UNDP's Human Development Report 1994. According to the report, human security has 5 important dimensions.[3]

1) **Human security has two main aspects.** It means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. Second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities. Such threats can exist at all levels of national development.

2) **The loss of human security can be a slow, silent process – or an abrupt, loud emergency**. It can be human-made – due to wrong policy choices. It can stem from the forces of nature. Or it can be a combination of both - as is often the case when environmental degradation leads to a natural disaster, followed by human tragedy.

3) **There have been two major components of human security: freedom from fear and freedom from want.** Together they feature mainly but not exclusively economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, political security.

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[3] United Nations Development Programme (1994), **Human Development Report 1994**, p. 23

4) The concept of human security stresses that people should be able to take care of themselves; all people should have the opportunity to meet their most essential needs and to earn their own living. This will set them free and help ensure that they can make a full contribution to development- their own development and that of their communities, their countries and the world. **Human security is therefore a critical ingredient of participatory development.**

5) Human security is not a defensive concept--the way territorial or military security is.   Instead, human security is an integrative concept. **It acknowledges the universalism of life claims. It is embedded in a notion of solidarity among people**. It cannot be brought about through force, with armies standing against enemies. It can happen only if we agree that development must involve all people.

1.2 Human security and related concepts

What makes human security a distinctive concept?   And how does it relate to others?

The crucial distinction is offered by Prof. Amartya Sen, Co-Chair of the Commission on Human Security, that underpinning the concept of human security are these following elements:[4]

1. A clear focus on <u>individual human lives.</u>

2. An appreciation of the <u>role of society and of social arrangement</u> in making human lives more secure in a constructive way.

3. A reasoned concentration on the <u>downside risks</u> of human lives, rather than on the overall expansion of effective freedom in general (contrasting with the broader objective of the promotion of **"human development"**).

4. A chosen focus, again , on the "downside" in <u>emphasizing the more elementary human rights</u> (rather than the entire range of **"human rights").**

The clear focus on the downside risks that may infringe the most elementary human rights of individual human lives bounded together in a social environment provides a concept with a distinctive overtone and dynamism.   It is focused, yet has a familiar ring to people of many walks of life.

2. Overview of the Thai Perspective and the Institutional Context

2.1 Overview of the Thai perspective

For the Thais, the concept of human security is becoming increasingly familiar as many forms of downside risks have unfolded abruptly or gradually to those who are least prepared to handle them.   These are only few recent examples:

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[4] Amartya Sen, "Basic Education and Human Security", Kolkata, 2-4 January 2002, pp.1-2

- economic crisis that took away jobs, houses and life-time savings,

- floods that abruptly claimed hundreds of lives,

- dams that depleted fish stock, and thereby uprooting people from their source of food, income and livelihoods,

- chemical explosion or leakages that left people permanently impaired,

- bombs that killed innocent people and took away businesses and left scores of people jobless,

- hazardous and industrial waste that pollutes the air and the water of nearby communities.

2.2 Reflection of the Thai experiences

The followings provide a glimpse of the feel and flavor of human security from the Thais' perspective.

"What we need is land security. Home to us means that we don't have to worry about being kicked out at someone's whim. For us, it doesn't matter what the houses look like. As long as the land is ours, we can die with closed eyes. To have our own land means our children will have a place to stay. When they have money, we know they will improve the house later on"

Community leader at Onnuj slum near the largest Bangkok's garbage dumpsite
(Sanitsuda Ekachai, Seeds of Hope: Local Initiatives in Thailand, 1994)

"We earn extra money from weaving and doing the tiinjok embroidery. But that is to cover our daily food expenses and allowances for our children. Our man problem is still farm debts. I know that weaving is money. But sometimes, when the due date for our interest payment is coming, I just can't weave. I can't sit still. My heart is like a ripe flower, ready to fall. Or a balloon just about to burst".

Mae Kongkham Sritiang, Mae Jaem, Chiangmai
(Sanitsuda Ekachai, Seeds of Hope: Local Initiatives in Thailand, 1994)

"GENCO (General Environmental Conservation PCL. – the largest hazardous waste treatment company) is just 400 to 500 metres away from the school. The children have suffered for a long time and staff at the Map Ta Phut hospital (also adjacent to GENCO) could become ill themselves. My house is right next to the site where GENCO piles up its waste. It's not just a heap – It's a mountain.....The foul smell is acute and irritating to the respiratory system. It makes us sick".

Pratoom Pongpaew, Map Ta Put, Rayong
(Peter Burt, Mucky Business: Industrial Waste Management in Thailand's Eastern Seaboard, 2001)

2.3 Human security and related concepts in the Thai context

Human security is not a new concept to the Thais who are among the first to explore the latest development ideas and to use them to re-valuate and make connection with their traditional and local values.

To a large extent, human security overlaps and connects with other important concepts that have become a basis for social changes in the past decades. Each concept has a special meaning and is more or less relevant to different groups.   It is necessary to introduce and operationalize "human security" in connection with these ideas, as well as to understand the historical and social context in which they were embraced by the Thais.

At the individual level, human potential is increasingly realized when one moves from "basic needs", a popular approach in the 1950s to "human development" which was gradually embraced by the Thais since late 1960s.   The realization of one's potential has a strong legal and ideological underpinning when such aspiration is supported by "human rights".   The 1997 Constitution strongly endorses this philosophical and institutional framework and sets in motion mechanisms to take it from vision to reality.

Individual: Basic needs   →   Human development

                                                  Human rights

At a societal level, the society has an obligation to support every member to realize his/her potential by, at the very least, providing a social safety net.   Those who manage to rise above the marginal safety net are more secured individually. By doing so, they also contribute to the "social capital" which in turn strengthens the society's capacity to provide a yet broader and more sustainable social safety net. A more concrete manifestation of these concepts took place during the economic crisis in the late 1990s.   All in all, fundamental to this virtuous cycle is the expansion and protection of community's rights, which enshrine, for the first time, in the 1997 Constitution.

Society: Social safety net   →   Social capital

                                                  Community's rights

2.4. Human security and recent institutional developments in Thailand

Until a few decades ago, national security was at the top of the national agenda as the country had to cope with threats from colonial rule, the Second World War, the Cold War and the Indochinese conflict that continued into 1980s.

Security and "development" came hand in hand. As a frontline state, Thailand received vast military and development aid.   Infrastructure development, especially rural road network, expanded rapidly for economic as well as military purposes. Since the first national development plan in 1961, its successors have continued to emphasize economic growth through industrialization.

"National security" gradually shifted toward an economic focus with the experience of the oil shortage, the end of the Cold War, and the double-digit growth due to external trade and tourism. The vision of becoming the next Asian tiger further reinforced the importance of sustained foreign investment and the international market.

Throughout this period, the preoccupation with security and economic development continued at the expense of democracy and participation. Although the paternalistic developmental state recognized and attempted to redress the negligence and emerging problems such as inequality, rural poverty, environmental degradation, the policy and practice was top-down and often insensitive to local situations.

As a result of over three decades of sporadic urban uprisings and sustained social movements in political, social and cultural in the rural areas, a new institutional context gradually fell into place by late 1990s. A combination of the economic crisis, the new Constitution and the 8th national development plan paved a new path for the Thai society. By and large, it is characterized by:
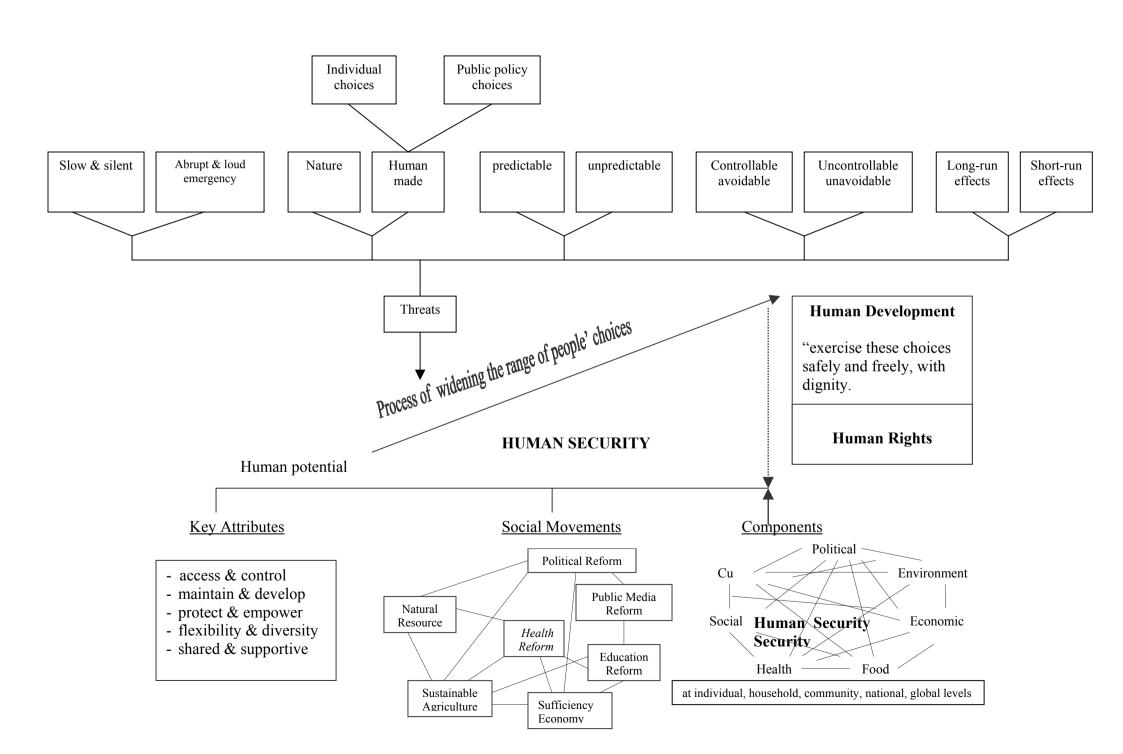
- endorsement of basic and far-reaching human and community rights,

- restructure of the public and private sectors toward good governance,

- decentralization and public participation,

- re-evaluation of globalization and its impact,

- revaluation of self-reliance and sufficiency economy,

- people-centred, balanced and sustainable development,

- revaluation of traditional wisdom, local heritage and cultural diversity.

This vision is echoed time and again in every part of the country and by various parties. Some serious reform initiatives have been brought about by the government, civil society and people's organizations. But it will take many more years to see if this vision would be realized, derailed, and whether the impact would be sustainable.

At present, "human security" as "people's security" is becoming part of the language of change for both policy makers and the public. Rural community leaders often cite the difference and trade-off between "prosperity" and "security of their livelihoods". The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, recently established as part of the bureaucratic reform, attests to the acceptance and popularity of this concept among the Thais. It has never been more opportune for Thailand to put this idea into practice.

2.5 Reconceptualize human security in the Thai context

The following diagram is an attempt to capture the concept of human security, its relationship with "human rights" and "human development", and how socio-economic situation and social movements in Thailand can be viewed through this lens.

Individual choices

Public policy choices

Slow & silent

Abrupt & loud emergency

Nature

Human made

predictable

unpredictable

Controllable avoidable

Uncontrollable unavoidable

Long-run effects

Short-run effects

Threats

Process of widening the range of people' choices

Human Development

"exercise these choices safely and freely, with dignity.

Human Rights

HUMAN SECURITY

Human potential

Key Attributes

- access & control
- maintain & develop
- protect & empower
- flexibility & diversity
- shared & supportive

Social Movements

Political Reform

Public Media Reform

Natural Resource

Health Reform

Education Reform

Sustainable Agriculture

Sufficiency Economy

Components

Political

Cu

Environment

Social

Human Security Security

Economic

Health

Food

at individual, household, community, national, global levels

- Human security components are similar to what the Thais understand as "holistic development" espoused by the 8th national development plan.

- Characteristics of threats to human security elaborate and give concrete meanings to what may seem like an abstract concept.

- The inter-connectedness of human security from the individual to global level confirms that "human security" is not an individualistic concept.

- By identifying key attributes to human security, and reviewing recent social movements, it is easy to understand how human security in Thailand can be strengthened, and possible to assess the prospect for further progress.

3. Human Security in Thailand – Situation Survey

3.1 Food security

Although Thailand is one of the top producers and exporters in the world food market, one-fifth of the population, or about 12 million people, is still undernourished.

The situation is rather ironic for the rural poor most of whom are themselves food producers. This includes small-farm holders, half a million families of landless farm workers, and one and a half million families who work on rented farm.[5] Their food security is dependent on their ability to produce and sell their produce in the face of changing natural and economic conditions. They are constantly at risks of various natures, e.g. infertile soil, flood, drought, over-supply, low price.

In addition, a variety of local food, especially those harvested from the forest and marine resources, have been lost due to monocropping and ecological degradation. Food safety is also becoming a real concern, as chemical fertilizer and pesticide use continued to rise.

This disconcerting situation is not lost on the public. The economic crisis has stimulated a nation-wide interest in food security and food self-sufficiency at the household and community levels.

> Even before the economic crisis, many rural households have followed an advice of a community leader who is famous for pioneering a self-sufficient integrated farm system.
>
> *"My advice is to grow everything you eat,
> and eat everything you grow".*
>
> Wibun Chemchalaem, Village Headman, Chacheongsao

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[5] Office of Environmental Policy and Planning (2001) **State of the Environment in the Year 2000**, p. 27 (in Thai).

3.2 Environmental security

> *"The pollution along the coastal strip is critical. The Thajin river is bad all year long. The creeks leading to the coast are black with filth, and no fish, prawns, or shellfish can survive. The polluted water comes from the factories which release untreated waste into the river – power station, semiconductor plants, textile factories, and industries of all sorts….. We can't live the way we did. We can fish for no more than four months in the year. This year we have been out to sea for only ten days. When the water turns tea-coloured, everything dies. Only the bones are left. You have to go out to sea for ten miles before you see any sign of life"*
>
> Fisherman, Samut Sakhon
> (UNDP, Human Development Report of Thailand 2003, Draft)

Environment is the fundamental basis for other security components. It supports healthy living for all life forms, and constitutes a foundation for sustainable development.

Although environmental degradation was recognized as a national problem since the 4th national development plan (1977-1981), there is no effective mechanism to tackle the problem. Air quality in urban areas is still poor, although the situation has improved significantly due to the switch to unleaded gasoline. But air quality in the industrial areas has deteriorated. Household and industrial waste management is another problem. Among the most alarming concerns is the fact that only 15% of hazardous waste is treated; the rest is illegally dumped in unidentified places.[6]

Deforestation and soil erosion are responsible for natural disasters that have risen in both frequency and severity over the past decade. These degradations, plus prolonged and excessive use of farm chemicals, have led to low productivity in the agricultural sector.

Inappropriate land use and ineffective land use planning have led to conflicts over natural resources, including land, water, forest and fishery resources. In this connection, the issue of access and control is at the core of the problem. Although the rights of local communities in natural resource and environmental management are enshrined in the Constitution, the policy and practice lag behind the letter of the law.

At present, about 460,000 rural poor families are regarded as "illegally" encroaching and living in conservation forests.[7] At question is whether the people

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[6] Ibid, p. 90.

[7] Community Forest Network (2002), **Community Forest Bill: People Love the Forest**, citing a survey by the Royal Forestry Department in 2001 (in Thai).

invade the forests, or the other way around, as a large part of the conservation forests were extended into lands that had been traditionally, but not legally inhabited by local communities for generations. Community forest is introduced as a new arrangement by which the forest and the people can live in harmony. This much awaited law has been intensely debated and is pending further deliberation at the National Assembly. Meanwhile, these people still live in constant fear of arrest and eviction.

Other noteworthy cases are those in which people who had lived in security and harmony with the nature were made to "sacrifice" their way of life to make way for "development" especially large irrigation and power plant projects, for the sake of "national interest" without adequate compensation and proper arrangement to ensure long-term security for their lives and those of their children.

3.3 Economic security

In a nutshell, economic security for an individual and his/her family is an assurance of basic income and safety net for absorbing risks and enhancing the prospect of human development. Despite an impressive record of poverty reduction over the past few decades, almost 9 million people, or about 14 percent of population, are still living under the poverty line. Most of them are rural farm households and farm workers. If marginal groups, those slightly above the poverty line who are at risk of falling at times of crisis, are included, one-fifth of the population is living without economic security.[8]

Evidence shows that these groups had made progress during the boom years that offered plenty of opportunities to everyone, but they suffered worse setback than other groups during the crisis. The gains they had painstakingly made throughout the years were instantly wiped out. This is because the opportunities yielded only short-term benefits, and were not converted into long-term security.

At the national level, economic security is unsustainable without proper balance between the economy and environment. At present, the emphasis is on growth with little consideration of the environment, which is the source of growth and security for future generations.

3.4 Social security

Until 2002, only 15% of Thai workers benefited from the social security scheme.[9] The expansion of the coverage to all workplaces with one or more employees in 2002 will provide shelter to those in the formal sector.   But those in the informal and agricultural sector do not have the protection, except for health care provided under the 30 Baht Health Care scheme.

There are, however, numerous small community schemes throughout the country.   These are community self-help initiatives that rely on social ties within

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[8] Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board's calculation from the 2000 Socio-Economy Survey.

[9] The World Bank (2000), **Thailand Social Monitor: Thai Workers and the Crisis**, citing the 1999 Labor Force Survey, p.42 (in English).

each community, and sometimes extend to outside networks. Some are supported by government agencies, some are on their own. But successful ones are mostly those initiated and managed by the communities themselves. Most savings schemes provide welfare benefits to members and non-members in the community.

In the aftermath of the crisis, the government began to recognize the merit and strength of these informal safety nets. It is important that the policy to enhance human security and social safety net echoes, endorses, supports, and emulates these success stories.

On the other hand, rapid socio-economic changes, i.e. urbanization, conflicts over natural resources, and the individualistic way of life, are weakening social cohesion and networks at all levels. Rising drug addiction and drug-related crimes, especially among the youth, are concrete examples of how individual's insecurity leads to social insecurity.

These social maladies affect the communities' and society's mobilization capacity. But without support from strong social networks, each person has only a limited range of coping strategies, which are inadequate to handle everyday life, let alone to survive a crisis.

3.5 Health security

The public health system is in transition. The universal coverage program, under the government's 30 Baht scheme, increases accessibility to health care for all people. Decentralization of health care management offers opportunities for local people to participate and exercise more control over the quality of care. But both programs are very new, and are struggling with many problems.

Moreover, some traditional and emerging health risks cannot be effectively controlled. Dengue and tuberculosis, have recurred, due to poor sanitation and nutrition among disadvantage groups, e.g. migrant workers. Concurrently, modern risks - which are usually linked to industrialization, urbanization, ecological changes, social tension, and environmental and health hazard of modern life, i.e. cancer, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, AIDS, sexually transmitted disease, accident, illness due to exposure to hazardous substance, have continuously increased.

"When it got very windy, we had to cover our nose with wet napkin. Some stayed under blanket. We had to close all the doors and windows, or fled to the beach – open space. Some handicaps could not walk. They had to stay and suffer the terrible smell. It's a very sad sight. Babies, children, and old folks get sick including myself, my family, my relatives, and neighbours."

Yuthana Phuchong, Map Tha Put
– the largest petrochemical and heavy industrial development zone, Rayong
(Apinya Tantaweewong (ed), Pai Pit (Succumbing to the Hazard):
Nine Lessons from Today's Society, 2001)

The latest strategy is to go beyond the health sector to promote the concept of healthy public policy in non-health sectors and the general public.

3.6 Cultural security

Cultural security is the rights and ability of local people to maintain and develop their own ways of living.   Culture provides a modus vivendi for people to live their lives in connection with one another and their natural surrounding, and with lineage to their predecessors and the next generation.   It is embedded in all aspects of livelihood - farming, health care, education, rituals, the exercise of rights and responsibility.

From one generation to the next, culture is a depository of collective knowledge and spirituality. Besides serving as a common thread in an ever-changing society, culture also provides security and coping skills that are suitable for each local community.   Thus, cultural diversity constitutes a great stock of local knowledge and wisdom, which can be applied to prevent or cope with any kind of threats to human security.   The rights to maintain cultural identity and practice is linked to various issues, from education to economic opportunities, from the rights to natural resources to the rights to fair representation in the media.

In a rush to become a "unified, strong and modern country", Thailand has sacrificed its cultural richness.   This is largely a result of educational "modernization" and cultural "harmonization".   Several minority groups are now struggling to preserve their culture by integrating their traditional practice in education, resource management, farming, and health care.   Even though cultural diversity is now recognized as an asset to the country, their attempts are still bogged down in a bureaucratic tussle over the issue of "community rights".

3.7 Political security

The Constitution has laid solid foundation for a new state-society relationship based on human rights, human development, and good governance. In general, political rights are actively exercised. Nonetheless, the principle and culture of democracy and good governance have by no means penetrated all aspects of the public and private processes.

Public policy-making process often lacks proper public participation. The process does not benefit from balanced assessment of positive and negative impacts to all stakeholders, and often fails to compare different alternatives.   As a consequence, some activities, albeit with noble intention, may jeopardize human security of vulnerable groups who have less voice and fewer choices to express their hope and fear.

It is evident that political security, especially with regard to people's participation in public-policy making, is a necessary precondition for the protection and promotion of human security.

4. Strategic Themes for Human Security in Thailand

The situation survey and the following account from a grassroots community in the Northeast highlight some essential themes that lie at the core of the human security in Thailand.

The bottom line is that people need **access** to resource, asset, network, and decision-making process to achieve a minimum level of decent and safe livelihood. This condition is attainable through a combination of highly interdependent human security components.

In many cases, accessibility is not enough. **Control** over resource, asset, and network is needed to ensure accessibility in the long run, especially the access and control of essential sources, i.e. land and the forest.

"Our life depends on the river, on what's in the water. We have peace and contentment when we have fish…. We only take from the river what we need. We use equipment we know won't destroy the stocks. We pass this knowledge down from generation to generation. This is a way of life that is sustainable.

The river was our bank. Whenever we needed money or food we just took our fishing equipment to the river. Some people had children in school so they had to catch more to make extra money. Many people here "sold fish to buy their children's education".

But when the (Pak Mun) dam was completed in 1994, many types of fish disappeared. We could not fish downstream from the dam because strong currents damaged our equipment. We could not fish upstream because fish could not jump the fish ladder. People found they itched after bathing in the river. Sediment filled the cataracts. The river bank was covered by water hyacinth and giant weed.

There used to be plenty of fish, crabs, natural cataracts, and food sources. But these things are gone. We can no longer fish. We have no chance to teach our children and grandchildren our heritage. Our culture and tradition has been swallowed just like the crabs and fish. This has created devastation, anger, hatred, and conflict…"

Villager affected by Pak Mun Dam

The access and control is for the purpose of **maintaining and developing** the sources of human security. Awareness and recognition of the rights of local people over the sources of their security is a necessary first step. Knowledge and culture is also a critical factor in furthering progress in human security.

An analysis of these strategic themes at the policy level shows that the state has a duty to **protect and empower** the people so that they can maintain their secured livelihood while supporting those in need and contributing to the well-being of the society at large.

This leads to the next strategic theme - **shared and supportive**. Due to limited resource, it would be costly, impractical, and inequitable to expect everyone to have a comfortable cushion in an individualistic manner. After all, human security is not an individual phenomenon. It is a shared and mutually re-enforcing collective feeling. Existing networks of formal and informal supportive mechanisms can be organized and expanded to enhance human security at the national level.

Last but not least, in order to cope with the uncertainty and unpredictability of various kinds of downside risks, individuals and the country need to draw upon their **diversity and flexibility**. Under the influence of the development philosophy that is based on a vision of linear growth and development, this capacity has been severely eroded. Thailand has learned a valuable lesson that ignorance and haste to embrace new technologies and new ways of thinking without careful assessment could weaken human security, thereby exposing the country to the downsides of modernization and globalization.

5. Social Movements for Human Security in Thailand

Since the "People's Constitution", the Thai civil society has been able to enlarge its political and social space. Social movements on different issues in different geographical areas have been able to make connections, and established formal or informal nation-wide, cross-sectoral networks. The expanded networks make the movements more sustainable and yield better impact on the ground, and at the policy level. Through these networks, civic and people's groups find themselves expanding the scope of their activities and spreading spillover effects, which cumulatively enhance overall human security.

5.1 Natural resource-based

Starting a decade ago, the natural resource-based movement focused on the issues of access and control, maintenance and development. It later expanded to cover the concern for biological and cultural diversity. This movement is very active in promoting community forest, community coastal resource management, and water management at community, regional, and national levels.

The focus on environmental security led to food, health, economic, social, cultural, and political security, especially for those whose livelihoods are highly dependent on these resources. Politics is now the most important barrier, since fundamental issues in resource management, e.g. land reform and community rights over forest and coastal resources, hang preciously on the political will.

5.2 Sustainable agriculture

This movement is closely linked with the first. It started two decades ago with an interest to develop farm resources and diversify farm produce. It later expanded to natural resource and sustainable agricultural and cultural practice. To assist farmers, the movement also recognizes the importance of learning process, farm credits and savings scheme, marketing management, health promotion and welfare.

The movement has scored an impressive success in managing to include sustainable agriculture as one of four strategies of the national agricultural policy.

5.3 Sufficiency economy

H.M. The King's Concept on Sufficiency Economy and The New Theory have significantly promoted economic security at all levels.   The New Theory consists of three stages. The first stage is concerned with organizing, maintaining and developing farm resources and achieving food security by diversifying farm production. Security at the farm level will be a strong basis for establishing shared and supportive mechanisms at the community level, in the second stage. These supportive mechanisms include education, community welfare, health care management, and saving schemes. The last stage is to expand community-based activities through interdependent and equal relationships with other parts of the society.

The 9th national development plan (2001-2006), the first that was drafted after the economic crisis, promulgates Sufficiency Economy as its guiding principle.

5.4 Health reform

The Constitution's endorsement of the rights of all Thai people to health care is the basis of the health reform, which started and expanded rapidly through networks of progressive medical doctors, health personnel, social activists, and active local communities. Among several concrete results is the universal coverage program.

Furthermore, health reform promotes the decentralization and participation of local people in health care management, including social care. Health security is being pursued by advocating for healthy public policy, which includes all aspects of human security, and requires support and active participation at the policy and grassroots levels.

5.5 Education reform

The education reform movement received a windfall from the Constitution that mandates 12-year free education for all children.   The Education Act of 1999 also aims to decentralize the school system and promote local participation in education management.   Local wisdom is recognized as an important source of knowledge. Both formal and informal, in-school and out-of-school education are part of the system.   At present, there are many impressive examples of local knowledge having been effectively integrated into the school system.   But bureaucracy is still an obstacle. As the education system has been under tight control of the bureaucracy for almost a century, changes will not be easy.

5.6 Media reform

The Constitution mandates that the civil society has more access to public media, which paves a way for an exciting prospect of community radios forming a nation-wide network of information exchange, social learning, social mobilization and civic advocacy.   This also means that health, social, and cultural issues will have more space on the airwave, according to the need of each community.

But changes have been staggeringly slow in this vested-interest business. Not willing to wait indefinitely, some local communities have established their community radio stations, which have yet to win the approval of the authorities.

5.7 Political reform

Political reform movement started after the urban uprising that overthrew the military regime in May 1992. It culminated in the drafting of the 1997 Constitution which is often called 'the People's Constitution" to acknowledge the active participation of the people during the drafting, and for its progressive content. The Constitution endorses the concept of human dignity, human rights and community rights, and lays important institutional framework for participatory democracy.

Political reform is therefore an umbrella for other social movements. Civic groups continue to monitor its implementation. To date, the development is marked by the establishment of several independent organizations including the National Human Rights Commission, National Economic and Social and Advisory Council, the Ombudsmen, the Administrative Court. These, and several other organizations, are among key mechanisms to protect and promote human rights, human development, and human security.

There are, however, other important organizations and laws that have not been in place, for example, the Consumer Protection Independent Organization, the Independent Environmental Organization, laws concerning community rights. These missing pieces could have contributed significantly to human security.

6. Conclusion

To cope with a wide range of downside risks, one needs to draw upon different sources of security. To enhance any aspect of human security, it is important to draw upon a concerted or network of movements in various areas. To do so, one needs to have a good grasp of the overall situation, and the efforts being made, directly and indirectly, formally and informally, by various parties, and figure out how to work through the loosely structured movements that are on the ground and on-going in every part of the country.

Surveying the Thai landscape, one is likely to find a variety of approaches and strategies, but they are unmistakably part of the pursuit for human security. The challenge for the civil society is to facilitate and stimulate the networking and learning process among these movements, and with the rest of the country.

The challenge for the government is to support this process, remove the institutional barriers, and firmly place "human security" in a public, not bureaucratic, sphere. This may start by fostering a meaningful and sustained multi-partite dialogue at national and local levels. Another significant task is to manage the macro socio-economic environment in a way in which the sources of human security are valued and protected, and the benefit is shared fairly, with priority given to the vulnerable and disadvantaged .

Last, but not least, globalization bestows both opportunities and risks to human security.   It is important to bear in mind that these opportunities and risks are often unfairly distributed.   Extreme injustice occurs when risks are shouldered by those that do not have sufficient coping capacity. "Globalization with a human face", a vision for a gentler and kinder globalized world has yet to be clearly defined. Human security is a concept that holds a promise of cooperation, and it needs to be shared, discussed, and embraced by all concerned for it to be a genuinely powerful force against fear and deprivation in this increasingly fragmented world.