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**Towards accountability:
Narrowing the gap between NGO priorities and local
realities in Thailand**

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Summary

Reflecting the negative ways in which international donors perceived the role of government in the 1980s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) became something of a favoured partner for multi- and bi-lateral donors in the 1990s and beyond. Underlying this transformation was a belief that flexibility, small size and the (relatively) altruistic motivations of NGOs enabled them to meet and articulate the needs of individuals whose preferences had been traditionally underrepresented in the realm of the market and the state. However, the features that make for greater flexibility and reach can also have a detrimental effect on those for whom aid is designed to assist. Lacking a formal means for ensuring that policies, schemes and programmes are in fact meeting their stated objectives, poor people can be highly disadvantaged when dealing with foreign or non-local NGOs. Exacerbating these factors, NGOs are often highly dependent on international donors whose programme priorities may overlook or misunderstand the needs and aspirations of their intended beneficiaries. Under such conditions the relationship between NGOs and beneficiaries can be far from accountable. Drawing upon 13 months of field research, this paper shows how villagers in southern Thailand were able to influence the terms on which an internationally funded NGO prioritised and allocated aid within their community. This, in turn, reflects a number of factors: (1) the organisational ability of the recipient community; (2) the limited resources of the NGO; and (3) donor stipulations regarding group formation and public participation. Such findings suggest that poor people can influence development policy and more importantly, that stipulations aimed at encouraging *and demonstrating* participation can improve accountability between NGOs and their intended beneficiaries.

1. Introduction

Reflecting the largely negative ways in which international donors perceived the role of government in the 1980s, NGOs became something of a ‘favoured partner’ for multi- and bi-lateral agencies engaged in international development in the 1990s and beyond.¹ Underlying this transformation was a strong intuitive belief that the flexibility, small size and (relatively) altruistic motivations of NGOs enabled them to meet and articulate the needs of individuals whose preferences had been traditionally underrepresented in market and state.

Challenging this, scholars of NGO-managed development have come to question the assumption that NGOs will necessarily meet or understand the needs of poor people more effectively than markets or state. As Brett (1993: 292) has argued:

Beneficiaries are clearly disadvantaged in exchanges with NGOs; they come as supplicants rather than equals and have little information about the NGOs’ resources or actions. They are aware of the services that the NGOs provide in their immediate area, but not of the costs involved, the way decisions are arrived at or what is happening elsewhere.

Unlike (well-functioning) governments, it is argued that NGOs lack clear and enforceable rules governing the ways in which officials relate to their beneficiaries. Unlike markets, they provide goods and services that are not subject to the ‘logic’ of price incentives and competition. Exacerbating these features, NGOs are often highly dependent on international donors whose programme priorities can overlook or undermine the needs and aspirations of their intended beneficiaries (Brett, 1993; Edwards and Hulme, 1992; 1995; 1996).

For all of these reasons, it is feared the gap between local priorities and NGO accountability can be wide. This paper considers this debate by exploring a highly informal line of accountability that emerged between an internationally funded NGO and a village community in southern Thailand. Using case study material (collected during 1997 and 1998), it argues that pessimistic assertions about NGOs and accountability tend to:

- (i) overstate the power that NGOs can exercise over their beneficiaries; and
- (ii) underplay the power and autonomy that poor people have at their disposal.

Specifically, it argues that the imposition of rules stipulating local participation empowered villagers to negotiate and transform the terms on which the NGO intervened in their community.

¹ See, for instance, Bebbington and Farrington (1992); Pretty and Chambers (1993); Carroll (1992); Clark (1991); Korten (1990); Bratton (1990); Farrington and Lewis (1993); Fisher (1994).

The evidence on which this paper makes its most authoritative claim is based on the study of a single NGO – funded by a number of different international agencies – working in one village community in southern Thailand.² As such, any generalisations about the nature of donor funding, NGO behaviour and for that matter southern Thailand, must be made with care. That having been said, a methodology of this nature provides an important (and relatively rare) opportunity to understand the ways in which a seemingly poor and powerless group of villagers can influence donor priorities and NGO activities.

The NGO in question was Wildlife Fund Thailand (WFT), a Thai NGO that originated as a domestic wing of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and subsequently established operations of its own. The intervention in question was a set of project activities designed to encourage fisheries conservation and sustainable development in Phangnga Bay. This research focuses on one of the villages in which it was working.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 considers the arguments for and against the notion that NGOs represent a more effective and accountable means of delivering development aid. Section 3 then introduces the case of WFT, examining its work in *Baan Ao Lom* and the relative success it was able to achieve within the village community. In Section 4, it is argued that the NGO's activities had a profound impact on the way in which villagers managed their local fishery and engaged in political life. Section 5 explains and assesses these lines of accountability and influence. Section 6 then offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

² The findings are based on a thirteen-month study (conducted in 1997 and 1998) of *Baan Ao Lom* (a pseudonym), a Muslim community on the island of Phuket (pronounced *poo-ghet*), a region known for its thriving tourist economy. Here villagers implemented, monitored and enforced rules of restricted access in their traditional fishery. My principal methodologies were key informant interviews, household surveys and the collection of government and non-governmental documents. All statements regarding occupation and assets in the village are the result of household surveys and key informant interviews. Surveys were conducted in every household in *Baan Ao Lom*.

2. Understanding the dilemma: NGOs, incentives and accountability

Assertions about NGOs and their ability to meet the needs of the poor are often made in contrast to a number of highly idealised assertions about markets and the state (see for instance, Brett, 1993; Robinson et al., 2000). Framed in this way, NGOs are understood as a ‘voluntary’ or ‘third’ sector that is less bureaucratic than government and more altruistic than the ‘free’ market (Korten, 1990; Brett, 1993).³

Underlying this theoretical construct, is the assertion that NGOs offer an ‘ideal type’ (Robinson et al., 2000) of organisation that moves away from the perceived shortcomings of market and state. Two assertions are generally used to substantiate this claim:

- Firstly, NGOs are believed to uphold high levels of altruistic motivation (Brett, 1993). Unlike government where officials organise around principles of hierarchy, competition (both within and among departments) and (more rarely) public spirit (e.g. Tendler, 1997), NGO staff are often highly committed to a particular value or goal and will work well beyond the going rate of remuneration to achieve it (Brett, 1993). Likewise, unlike the market, NGOs are able to engage in activities in which no rational economic actor would ever invest. For these reasons it is argued that NGOs are well suited to provide non-profit goods and services, such as preventative healthcare, micro-credit and natural resource management (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Fisher, 1994).
- Second, and related to this, NGOs are believed to be more flexible than large and hierarchically structured bureaucracies and firms (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Fisher, 1994). This, it is argued, reflects the fact that many NGOs are small organisations in which decisions and activities are based on close interpersonal relations, and are not constrained by bureaucratic codes of behaviour. Because of this, NGOs can adapt their project priorities to suit local conditions.

As the preceding suggests, such assertions are somewhat problematic. First, they tend to focus on NGOs whose activities and organisational pressures are relatively small in size. Whether these assertions would apply for NGOs whose size and activities transcend the level of face-to-face relations is highly questionable (Brett, 1993; Edwards and Hulme, 1992; 1995). Second, and more central to this paper, NGOs are rarely, if ever, financially self-sufficient. On the contrary, they are often highly dependent upon the continuing financial support of individual and institutional donors.

Dilemmas of this kind are familiar to the field and desk officers of Wildlife Fund Thailand. According to its staff, an ongoing concern was the task of maintaining and improving project funding. In 1997 and 1998, the NGO’s principal funders were the Community Aid Abroad (Oxfam Australia), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Novib (Oxfam Netherlands), whose allocations provided enough money to support four full-time staff, a rental truck and a small budget for travel and discretionary spending. Both of these were twelve-month dispersals.

³ Of course, these models are highly stylised in the sense that they are rarely (if ever) achieved in reality. Their utility then, is measured in terms of their ability to serve as a guide for future action. Bearing this in mind, the debate to which we refer at the beginning of the paper becomes important in the sense that it provides a set of theoretical assertions about the nature of non-governmental organisations and the role they can play in development.

These conditions produced a dilemma that will be familiar to scholars of NGO-managed development. First, the NGO was in the constant position of having to attract project funding. Second, and related to this, it had to 'sell' itself and its projects to foreign donors.

The central problem with this situation and one that plagues many NGOs (Brett, 1993; Edwards and Hulme, 1995), is the problem of multiple accountability. On the one hand, its programmes and organisational priorities were based on meeting the needs of the rural poor (more on this below). On the other, it was highly beholden to WWF, Novib and other international donors.

In theory, the relationship between an arrangement of this nature and NGO accountability can be very thin indeed (Brett, 1993; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). As Brett (2000: 41) has argued 'accountability works best when rewards (for good performance) depend directly on the quality of service provided – failures occur when there is no direct relationship between the two'. However, the need to maintain offices, staff and other drains on project funding makes it very difficult to either recognise or meet the needs of the rural poor.

Such 'gaps' in accountability can manifest themselves in at least two ways. First, the need to maintain funding may create a situation in which projects are designed in a way that reflects the needs and preferences of donors, not beneficiaries (Brett, 1993; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Second, beneficiaries may be placed in a position in which their ability to influence inappropriate or undesirable interventions is limited (Brett, 1993). When beneficiaries are not consulted about project priorities, ill-informed about the NGO's activities and poorly organised, the efficacy, sustainability and accountability of the intervention can be limited indeed (Brett, 1993; Chambers, 1983).

However, all of this assumes that beneficiaries are not consulted, ill informed and poorly organised. When such conditions do not apply, there is no reason to believe that donor priorities and the need to maintain funding *will automatically* undermine the interests of the intended beneficiaries.

A critical factor of course, is the kind of relationship that exists between the 'agents' that deliver development aid and the 'principals' who are intended to benefit as a result (Brett, 1993). If beneficiaries are able to exercise power over external agents, their ability to hold them in check will be strengthened. How they exercise this power and whether they encourage the kind of equitable and 'democratic' development that proponents of NGO-managed development envisage, however, is often unclear.

Drawing upon evidence from southern Thailand, it is argued here that the largely negative assertions that scholars of NGO-managed development make about NGOs and accountability overstate the power that NGOs can exercise over their beneficiaries, and underplay the power and autonomy that poor people have at their disposal. To do this, a case study of the WFT is examined.

3. Intervention, conservation and WFT

In *Baan Ao Lom*, the village in which this case study was conducted, WFT was engaged in two principal project activities: (1) a fisheries conservation scheme; and (2) a savings and credit group. The first activity that constitutes the principal focus of this paper, entailed an institutional arrangement in which villagers cooperated to protect their local fishery by excluding vessels using trawlers, push nets, explosives and poison (technologies that had created substantial destruction and conflict in the area (Johnson, 2000).

According to villagers, access to the fishery was open to any vessels that agreed to refrain from using the banned technologies. The boundaries of the enclosed area were based on a loose, yet shared understanding of the areas in which villagers had historically set their nets and traps. Reinforcing this round sweeping contours and outer islands provided clear boundaries by which villagers could develop a strong sense of entitlement.

Enforcement of the conservation zone was exclusively dependent upon collective action from within the village community. According to village accounts, individuals would monitor the ban either by conducting special patrols or by following the situation while they were out at sea. The principal means that villagers used to enforce this ban were intimidation and force.

Essential here was the ability to mobilise large numbers of people. According to village accounts, villagers would deter push net operators by assembling as many boats as they could and challenging them to leave the bay. On occasion they would also apprehend the boats, which they would then use as evidence when reporting the violation to local authorities. The risks of engaging in such direct confrontation were significant. During one episode in 1996, a villager from *Baan Ao Lom* was arrested for (and ultimately cleared of) capsizing a longtail boat belonging to a push net operator. The following year, a villager from neighbouring *Baan Khlong Khian* was shot and killed while helping government officials arrest push netters who were fishing in their conservation zone (in the province of Phangnga).

Recognising the risks of engaging in armed confrontation, villagers pursued a parallel strategy of communicating their position to the offending parties. This would generally entail villagers from *Baan Ao Lom* meeting push netters at sea or in their home villages, to emphasise the point that they were ready and willing to defend the bay. Intimidation and communication it seems, produced credible deterrents. Push net operators from surrounding villages reported they were aware of and respected the conservation zone in *Ao Lom*. Supporting these accounts, villagers in *Baan Ao Lom* allege that the fishery had improved since the rules were first introduced in 1995.

What is particularly striking about this institutional arrangement is that it provided no *direct* means of encouraging individuals to bear the costs of enforcing the fishery. Conspicuous in their absence were penalties for free-riding, salaries for enforcement and compensation for the provision of boats, fuel and labour. Equally interesting, collective action was largely separate and distinct from the official organisational activities of the village bureaucracy. Although members of the village council were involved in the fishery protection scheme, and although the village council was empowered to deal with conflicts in the community, enforcement of the territorial zone had little to do with this formal state apparatus.

Additionally, external state agencies played a minor role in the creation and enforcement of the conservation zone. According to village accounts the government had no say in the original decision to protect the bay. Confirming these reports, all of the officials with whom I spoke during the early stages of my fieldwork said they were unaware of the existing conservation scheme. Moreover, government agencies appear to have made little effort to coordinate their enforcement activities with those of villagers in *Baan Ao Lom*. Local officials reported that although they conducted patrols in the area, their activities were largely unrelated to resource conservation activities.

In contrast to this, WFT appears to have been involved throughout the process. According to villagers, WFT's impact on village attitudes and activities was profound. First, it encouraged villagers that protecting the fishery was a worthwhile pursuit. Second, it connected villagers with a wider circle of allies with whom they could mount a more effective political lobby. Third, it compensated the expenses of villagers who travelled to rallies and meetings in support of small-scale fishermen in and around Phuket. Finally, it encouraged villagers to escalate their political demands.

Critical to this was the exchange of information regarding villagers' rights vis-à-vis the bureaucratic state. Villagers in *Baan Ao Lom* were (impressively) well-apprised about laws relating to forests and fisheries and about new changes in the 1997 constitution. Here, WFT was particularly active in transmitting information about individual and community rights and encouraging villagers to demand and articulate these rights in front of the district chief (*nai ampoe*) and provincial governor (*phu wa*).

By undertaking these roles, the NGO cultivated 'new conceptions of identity and self-worth' (Popkin, 1979: 243), delivering a powerful message that villagers could and *should* negotiate their demands with government officials. An important illustration of this was the change in relations between villagers and local district officials. Until the arrival of WFT, villagers report that people in *Baan Ao Lom* had little contact with officials beyond the sub-district level. Aside from the monthly meetings that all village headmen were required to attend, relations between the district office and the village community were minimal. Many villagers told me that before WFT started working in the village, people were simply too frightened to visit the district office. By 1998 however, meetings between district officials and villagers – in which villagers would petition their demands and grievances in front of the district chief – had become a regular event.

The importance of this transformation cannot be overstated. In rural Thailand, the district chief is a man of tremendous influence and authority. Within the Ministry of the Interior, he is the most direct link between rural society and the coercive arm of the state. In times of instability, he is one of the few local government officials who can call in the military.⁴

That 'ordinary' villagers would (a) meet the district chief and (b) challenge him in public (something I witnessed on a number of occasions) is testament to the effect the NGO had on political life in *Baan Ao Lom*. Here, NGO staff maintained that they were simply supporting what the villagers were already trying to do. According to villagers, the NGO provided a vital link between the village and the public sphere of political negotiation. Indeed, many villagers expressed the concern that they would lose this political connection if, or when, the NGO ever decided to pull out of *Baan Ao Lom*.

⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Pasuk Pongphaichit for pointing this out to me.

In short, the project that WFT encouraged in *Baan Ao Lom* could easily be deemed a success, both in terms of the collective action I observed during my time in the village and by the statements that villagers made about the NGO. To what extent, however, was collective action and the move to protect coastal fishing the result of WFT's work in *Baan Ao Lom*? To this question we now turn.

4. Cause or catalyst?

According to villagers and members of the NGO, WFT did not find out about *Baan Ao Lom* until news of a local dispute appeared in a regional newspaper (*Siangtai*). The dispute in question was over plans to extend an arterial road leading into the village. Opposing the plan was a local rubber plantation owner who did not want to sacrifice his trees for the road. According to villagers, ‘discussions’ came to a head when the owner started threatening villagers with a pistol, which prompted the intervention of the police, the media and ultimately gained the attention of WFT.

What this suggests is that villagers were engaged in collective political activities before the NGO arrived in *Baan Ao Lom*. To what extent, however, can we attribute the move to conserve coastal fishing to the work of WFT?

As the preceding suggests, members of the NGO were actively engaged in providing information and support that would facilitate the move to protect coastal fishing. Whether they convinced villagers to implement and enforce the conservation zone however, is not clear. Interviews with villagers and NGO staff suggest that WFT arrived in the village shortly before villagers started policing the bay. According to both parties, villagers had by this time already initiated plans to start protecting the fishery. They did not start enforcing the zone however, until the NGO was working with the village.

What this implies is that villagers were ‘prepared’ (both organisationally and ideologically) to implement the conservation area, but it was the NGO that provided the crucial motivation. Supporting this assertion are the findings for the villages surrounding *Baan Ao Lom*; only one other village in the sub-district attempted to enforce rules of restricted access, and this village was working with WFT.

However, despite the role it played in ‘catalysing’ cooperation and political action, we should not lose sight of the fact that the NGO was still ultimately dependent upon the acquiescence of local elites and – to a large extent – the formal bureaucratic structure within which it was forced to work. This in turn reflected the fact that, in the final analysis, WFT (like any NGO) lacked the power and resources to compel cooperation within the village community.

Facilitating its activities in *Baan Ao Lom* was an elite with an interest in institutional change (in general) and coastal fishing (in particular). The sub-district councillor for instance, was both a fisherman and a member of an extended family whose ten households (almost a quarter of the village) were all engaged in coastal fishing. Another member of the village council (the natural leader) was a full-time fisherman and a principal in the small-scale fishing movement.⁵

Support of this kind was vital. According to NGO staff, WFT encountered significant problems in villages where the headman and other local notables were either indifferent or directly opposed to the NGO’s project activities. In a neighbouring village for instance, it was forced to leave after encountering substantial resistance from the village headman.

⁵ This, it is worth noting, was the same individual who was arrested for sinking the push net.

What this implies, is that WFT's access and influence in *Baan Ao Lom* was highly contingent upon an ability to recognise and meet the needs of important actors within the village community. In other words, WFT's influence in the village was somewhat less than theorists of NGO-managed development would lead us to believe.

However, to infer that NGO activities reflected the needs and aspirations of all of the village community would overlook two important factors; (a) the NGO's own priorities, which were influenced in no small part by their international donors; and (b) competing interests within the village.

This raises two important questions about NGO influence and accountability. First, how were villagers able to influence the activities that WFT pursued in *Baan Ao Lom*? Second, to what extent did these priorities reflect the general will of the village community?

5. Priorities, politics and accountability

Fieldstaff of WFT offered three explanations for their relatively successful experience in *Baan Ao Lom*. First, they argued that they were more 'in tune' with the needs and aspirations of the local people. This they felt was because they spent more time in the community and were willing to listen to what villagers had to say. Second, they asserted that their vision of development differed substantially from the conventional development programs that emanated from Bangkok. Specifically, they supported a range of activities (the conservation scheme, the community bank, resistance to the shrimp farms) designed to improve political and economic ability within the village. A final (and crucial) factor, was that four out of the five project staff were Muslims from Phuket. As such they shared an important religious and cultural affiliation with villagers, which improved both their relations and their standing in the village community.⁶

All of these are valid accounts. Compared with the standard government project, WFT's activities were highly inclusive affairs (see Hirsch, 1990; Rigg, 1991; and Vandergeest, 1991 for examples of the former). This would typically entail two types of activity:

- informal conversations in which NGO staff would discuss issues and priorities with key individuals within the village community; and
- more formal meetings in which the NGO would encourage large segments of the village to participate in meetings, rallies and other forms of public action.

As noted earlier, the Phuket office of WFT was a relatively small operation. Project funding provided enough money to support four full-time staff, a rental truck and a small budget for travel and discretionary spending. Budget horizons were roughly twelve months in length.

The implications of this were twofold. First, WFT could afford to allocate only a small amount of resources in the village community. Second, it had to pursue a diverse and rather flexible project agenda. WWF for instance, prioritised the conservation of coastal resources, encouraging the fisheries conservation group and a mangrove rehabilitation activity on the far side of the neighbouring shrimp farm. In contrast, Novib's main priorities were geared towards the empowerment of vulnerable groups in the village community, women in particular. Towards this end, one of its principal activities was the formation of the community bank in which women were encouraged to play a leading role.

In theory then, WFT was highly beholden to a very particular set of donor priorities. In practice, however, villagers – and WFT – were able to adapt these priorities to suit the needs and interests of particular individuals within the village community. Environmental conservation then, became the implementation of rules governing restricted access to the local fishery. Networking, empowerment and group formation became a coordinated effort to induce the state to enforce laws restricting push nets and trawlers from the three-kilometre areas. Self-sufficiency became a community bank that villagers used to maintain and improve their ability to exploit the regional economy.

⁶ Improving this further was the fact that one of the NGO staff was the son of a major Muslim leader in the area.

How do we account for this? The answer, I contend, is threefold. First, WWF and Novib had instituted funding procedures that required WFT to consult with villagers and donor representatives on a regular basis. Second, villagers knew about this. Finally, donor priorities were defined with sufficient ambiguity to allow considerable room for manoeuvre. All of these factors, it is argued, created strong conditions for accountability and influence.

As beholden as it was to international funding, the need to maintain the support of donors and the emphasis on group formation had the (largely unintentional) effect of empowering the village community. This was principally due to the fact that WFT could not obtain access to additional funding without demonstrating successful group formation and (at least) a partial fulfilment of its project objectives. Verification was facilitated by the regular visits representatives from WWF and Novib conducted in the village. Moreover, villagers were well aware of these constraints, and used them to their advantage (see below). Reflecting the ambiguous terms on which the NGO and its donors defined their activities, they were able to pursue a wide array of activities under the banner of environmental conservation, empowerment and self-sufficiency.

To what extent, however, did these goals and activities reflect the ‘general will’ of the village?

After a number of months in the community, it became clear to me that village opinion was divided over the role the NGO had played in the village community. Proponents of the move to conserve coastal fishing justified its presence in terms of defending an important livelihood, defending the poor (*‘khon jon’*) and improving the village in general. Encouraging this image was WFT, whose members argued that the defence of the fishery was in the interest of everyone in *Baan Ao Lom*.

Here, it is important to stress the ideological weight the conservation scheme carried within the village community. In one respect, this was reflected in the meetings and rallies that WFT and proponents of the protected fishery conducted within and beyond the village community. In another, it was reflected in my private conversations with villagers, particularly those whose livelihoods were not highly dependent on coastal fishing. Among many non-fishing households, opinions were strongly supportive of both the conservation area and the preservation of coastal fishing.

Those at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum were somewhat less sanguine. Although they attracted many people, all of the village meetings I attended were seemingly dominated (physically and ideologically) by village elites, full-time fishermen and members of WFT. If poorer members of the community were in attendance, I did not see them and they certainly did not speak out. Similar assertions were true of rallies outside of *Baan Ao Lom*.

Here it would be tempting to infer that the poor were ‘too busy being poor’ to participate in ‘non-essential’ village activities. This would be somewhat misleading. First, it would underplay the socio-economic factors that *prevented* individuals from participating in collective activities. Here, access to communication technologies created a situation in which a small village elite could obtain information about NGO rallies and meetings, which they could then communicate to the rest of the village community. Only four families in *Baan Ao Lom* had a telephone. Of these, three were the sub-district councillor, the village headman and a member of the village council (who was also a leader of the fishing movement).

Second, it would underplay the material and symbolic benefits villagers could obtain by supporting and leading the fishing movement. Because of the size of the village, any meeting or gathering was effectively a public event. This was particularly true of the meetings in which outsiders – such as government officials or NGO workers – conducted activities in the village. Unlike the formalised relations between village officials and public officials however, meetings in support of the small-scale fishing movement were highly inclusive affairs, which tried (although did not necessarily succeed) to attract villagers from all ‘walks of life’. For this reason, they provided an important means by which leaders and aspiring leaders could assert their place in and commitment to, the village community. Reinforcing this process the tactics that proponents of the conservation zone used to pursue their goals were highly contingent upon negotiations with (relatively) high-ranking government officials and visible demonstrations outside of the village community.

Beyond wealth and socio-economic status, another source of rivalry within the village was sectoral interest. As noted earlier, WFT’s arrival in *Baan Ao Lom* was principally the result of a dispute over the road leading into the village. At the time the issue was highly divisive within the village. For those whose livelihoods were dependent on the ability to extract and process coastal resources, the road represented a new and potentially lucrative link to up- and downstream markets. Ultimately, a small and influential number of these were able to exploit this new opportunity. Unsurprisingly, villagers who tapped rubber were somewhat less enthusiastic about losing their stock and upsetting relations with the plantation owner.

The decision to intervene on behalf of those supporting the road extension was a highly political move. First, it undermined the interests of two important actors; (a) the plantation owner; and (b) the villagers who worked the rubber plantations. Second, it defined the allies and key informants with whom the NGO would have to work in the aftermath.

In this respect, WFT’s most important ally was the sub-district councillor, whose interests and ambitions went well beyond the aim of preserving the local fishery. This reflected both the position he held within the local bureaucracy and the (not unrelated) influence this created within the village.

In short, cooperation between WFT and villagers ‘worked’ because certain villagers were willing to support the changes the NGO was trying to achieve. Moreover, it appears that villagers were able to influence this agenda, although some were more influential than others.

6. Conclusion

A principal aim of this paper was to consider the conditions under which beneficiaries of development aid can influence the ways in which NGOs intervene on their behalf. Using case study material, it is argued that donor regulations (stipulating consultation), access to information about this process, organisational capacity and the NGO's need to maintain the support of important individuals within the village help to explain the fact that the beneficiaries of this developmental intervention were able to influence the NGO's project agenda.

Would it be fair to say that the relationship thus described was accountable? If accountability is conceptualised as the means by which villagers shaped and influenced the NGO's work in the village, then the experience in *Baan Ao Lom* was accountable. By regulating access to the community and by participating in public and private discussions, villagers were able to shape the terms on which WFT conducted its work in the village.

Such findings are significant, not least because they provide an important (yet limited) empirical proof that propositions recommending the institutionalisation of participatory processes in donor funding can have an empowering effect. Reinforcing this, was the fact that WFT was required to consult with villagers and (significantly) that villagers were aware of this.

However, if we conceptualise accountability in a more democratic way in which collective decisions reflect the interests of the broadest possible constituency, then the findings presented here are somewhat less optimistic. Proponents of the conservation zone used an image of poverty to justify an institutional arrangement that prevented push nets, trawlers and other competitors from entering the bay. Dominating this process were the full-time boat owners, members of the NGO and villagers whose perceived stake in the fishery and the community was strong. Reinforcing this was the fact that access to information (about rallies, meetings, etc.) was limited to individuals with telephones and other private lines of communication. It was also due to the prestige that participation in meetings and rallies of this nature carried within the village community.

Findings of this nature present something of a dilemma for proponents of participation, accountability and NGO-managed development. Primarily they suggest that the institutions of power on which villagers were able to organise and hold WFT to account were the very same institutions that excluded poorer villagers from this process. As the preceding suggests, participation in meetings, rallies and other NGO-managed activities provided important material and symbolic rewards that inspired great acts of selfless behaviour. To assume that such benefits would be any less subject to competition and struggle would understate the power and privilege that underlie village society.

Second, and related to this, the findings presented here illustrate the challenge of promoting accountability and democracy in societies in which livelihoods are still highly dependent upon interpersonal and unequal relations. Like the rubber tappers who were loathe to challenge the interests of the plantation owner, most villagers respected and followed the authority of important local notables, such as the sub-district councillor, the headman and other members of the village council. Whether formal mechanisms of accountability would work in an environment of this kind is highly questionable. As Thailand's electoral experience suggests, abstract theories of democracy lose much of their appeal when rural notables assume the responsibility of putting them into practice (Robertson, 1996).

Finally, the experience in *Baan Ao Lom* raises serious questions about the extent to which NGOs of the size and ability of WFT can influence local politics and accountability in rural areas. Although its emphasis on public participation empowered individuals within the community, we should not lose sight of the fact that the NGO's presence in the village was highly contingent upon the support of important political actors such as the village headman and the sub-district councillor. To suggest that NGOs can, or should, try to influence these more enduring patterns of power, may overstate the power they have at their disposal and understate the resilience of local (and potentially unequal) institutions.

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