

# Chapter 11

## Not only Anti-dam: Simplistic Rendering of Complex Salween Communities in Their Negotiation for Development in Thailand



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### 11.1 Introduction

Since the 1970s, hydropower dam projects in the lower Salween River Basin have been planned as joint undertakings of the Myanmar, Thai and Chinese governments, state-owned enterprises, and multinational corporations (Lamb et al., Chap. 1, this volume). In response, civil society groups at various levels have mobilized against the proposed Salween dam projects, including Thai and international environmental organizations and human rights groups, academics, and journalists, with considerable support from locals who oppose these controversial dams (see Middleton et al., Chap. 3, this volume).

In 2007, the author began observing residents along the Salween, finding that, generally, local ethnic groups have continuously opposed these controversial dam projects. Hence, these villages have been represented as anti-dam communities by project developers (Modinator 2014). At the same time, local communities are situated in poor conditions of “development” (in Thai language, *kanphatthana*), or lacking development; lacking access to resources, roads, government services, land rights and citizenship (Hengsuwan 2012).

Although community protests may be interpreted as ‘anti-development,’ I argue that their reaction to development is actually more complex. Community members in fact seek development, but on their own terms (Keyes 2014: 135, 161). Furthermore, given the cultural and political complexity, this engagement cannot be reduced to a simplified struggle between state domination and community resistance (Orther 2006, cited in Walker 2012: 150). This is because local villagers have played a part in the extension of state power through development programs by pursuing, engaging in, and reframing state-sponsored development initiatives (Walker 2012: 150–151).

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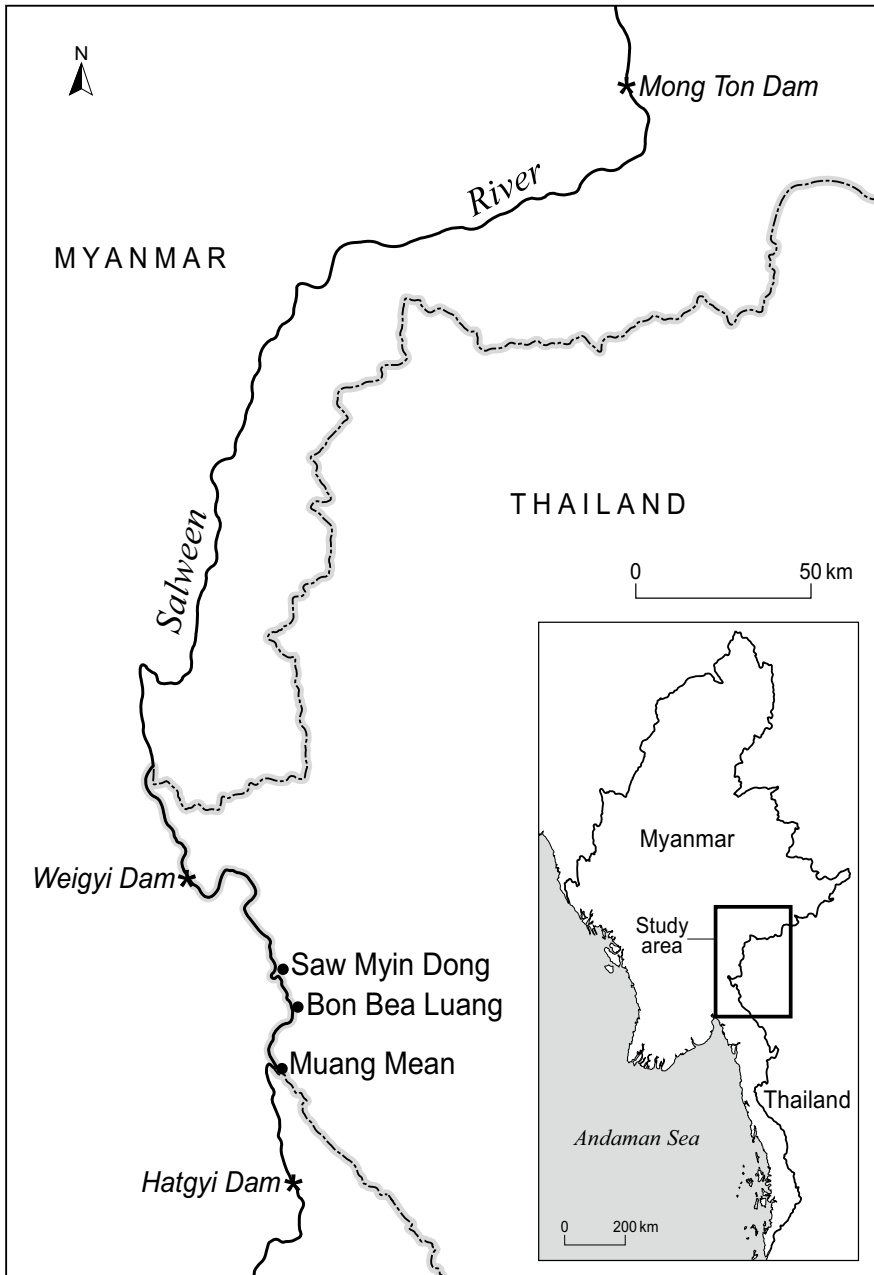
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The purpose of this chapter is to first analyze how Salween dams have been framed through state-project developer collaboration as hegemonic discourses of development. Underlining these discourses are that dams are development (Bakker 1999), and thus, that resistance to dams is anti-development. For villagers at the Salween who are anti-dam, they find themselves therefore positioned as anti-development by project developers (Modinator 2014). At the same time, local communities are situated in poor conditions of ‘development’ (in Thai language, *kanphatthana*), or lacking development; lacking access to resources, roads, government. In this chapter I analyze how individuals and communities have engaged in state development by proposing local development initiatives. The chapter thus shows how the villagers’ anti-dam movement, in working with civil society, is one of the arenas through which communities are spurring local development. In this sense, it is overly simplistic for dam project proponents to claim that these communities are merely anti-dam. Actually, the Salween dam projects are just one of the local communities’ concerns when contemplating future livelihoods. They are also advocating for land rights, community and citizenship rights, and access to basic infrastructure and government services. This chapter therefore proposes that we reposition and reframe the anti-dam movement as not a singular issue, but rather part of a wider array of movements surrounding local development. While both project developers and civil society campaign groups may focus on a single project or issue, both local communities and the government require a holistic approach to development planning.

## 11.2 Methodology

This chapter is an analysis of information from dissertation research conducted on environmental politics and resource management in Thailand, along the Salween borderlands, during 2007–2010, along with fieldwork conducted in the same communities along the border from 2016 to 2017. Rather than avoiding communities exposed to political advocacy in development conflicts where NGOs and academics have influenced villager’s perceptions (Sangkhamanee 2013: 12), three villages central to anti-dam campaigning along the Salween River in Thailand were chosen: Saw Myin Dong, Bon Bea Luang, and Muang Mean (See Fig. 11.1: Map of study sites (3 villages) along the Thai-Myanmar border). In-depth interviews with 25 key informants from these three villages were conducted, along with interviews with 11 local and national activists. Participant observation, along with participation in meetings, activities, and NGO field visits also shed light on the complexity of villagers’ techniques to deal with ‘development’ while at the same time sustaining their lives, communities, and cultures.

The three villages are located in Mae Hong Son Province on the Thai side of the Salween River where it forms the Thai-Myanmar border. Diverse ethnic communities have settled along the Salween borderland, including Karen, Myanmar, Shan, and Khon Muang (Northern Thai). Most of the villagers in Saw Myin Dong and Muang Mean are ethnic Karen. Saw Myin Dong is comprised of 128 households,



**Fig. 11.1** Map of study sites (3 villages) along the Thai-Myanmar border. *Source* Cartography by Chandra Jayasuriya, University of Melbourne, with permission

with a population of 926. Of this number, 661 people possess Thai identity cards. Muang Mean has 89 households (only one hamlet), with a population of 884. In Muang Maen, 631 people possess Thai identity cards. The residents of Bon Bea Luang mainly identify as Karen, Karen Muslim, and Shan. Bon Bea Luang has 279 households, with a population of 1,542. Only 603 residents possess Thai identity cards. On the Myanmar side of the Salween opposite the towns of Saw Myin Dong and Bon Bea Luang are Myanmar military camps, but opposite Muang Mean is a Karen National Union-held area. The proposed Wei Gyi and Dagwin Dams would be located upstream of these villages, and the proposed Hatgyi Dam would be located downstream.

Various discourses rationalizing plans for dams on the Salween River have emerged since the 1980s. The production of the meaning of, for instance, ‘development’ or ‘nature’ is a discursive practice, and such meaning emerges not only because of language or speech, but also because of actual practice to define the truth (Foucault 1977; Yoon 2001). Therefore, instead of taking these meanings for granted, one should analyze ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ as the practice of ‘power’ (Foucault 1980; Lorenzini 2015).

Hydropower dams as ‘development’ is one of these meanings. This ‘truth’ is co-constructed by states/capitalists as a dominant hegemonic discourse, serving as a guide for how to use a river to generate economic growth and national progress, and expressing the production of a Salween resource frontier by means of regulation. Project developers frame the river, via scientific discourse, as prime for hydro-electricity production, which in turn generates development (Bakker 1999). Meanwhile, the Myanmar and Thai states also use ‘development discourse’ (Escobar 1995; Gupta 1998) and ‘civilizing the margins’ (Duncan 2004) as a means to accelerate territorialization (Vandergeest 1996) and to enhance capitalist expansion into the borderlands. It is important to investigate how development is framed, and how development discourse may be changed to community development.

However, it is not only the state that can create ‘truth’. The villagers and organizations I spoke to also make claims. For instance, community groups claim community development as a sub-discourse of development, albeit one which is set against the state/capitalist regime of dams as development ‘truth’. I discuss the details further in the following sections as linked to production of environmental knowledge and discourse in Thailand.

### **11.3 Communities’ Production of Knowledge and Discourse**

Since the 1980s, Thai communities and social movements have evolved new approaches in their engagement with the state, including people’s movements, mobility, and counter-knowledge production. This section briefly introduces these approaches in the broader context of Thailand, before we turn more specifically to the Salween borderlands. Firstly, the late 1980s saw the emergence of several new

organizations representing rural demands, such as the *Assembly of the Poor*, a peasant movement for rights to land, water, and forests. They have used both the street and the media to open up space in national politics for rural demands. The strategies of these movements reflect a sophisticated appreciation of the wider national political economy, and this sophistication is attributed to the role of urban NGOs and leaders who possess both rural origins and urban experience (Baker 2000: 5–11).<sup>1</sup>

A second factor contributing to increased engagement with the state has been the mobility of rural villagers in response to a growing labor market. Since the 1950s, northeastern villagers began to migrate to Bangkok and later overseas in search of wage employment. Migration indicates that most northeastern villagers have made ‘development’ of their rural worlds a personal goal. They are “cosmopolitan villagers” who have gained a sophisticated understanding of the world and have become considerably less compliant than in the past. They found they could now turn to NGOs as well as to certain academics, newspapers, and even a few elected representatives for support of their concerns (Keyes 2014: 149–173). We can say that they have a “cosmopolitan vision” (Petras 1997: 19–20).

Thirdly, we can look at knowledge production found in the case of *Thai Baan* research. *Thai Baan*, or ‘Villager’ Research, is kind of local knowledge research that is positioned as a “counter-hegemonic approach” to conventional research and another means that local people have employed to contest development (Vaddhanaphuti 2004: v). In doing so, local knowledge in environmental management is used as a political force for dam-affected villagers to express their views and engage with government institutions to influence development planning and decision-making processes. In other words, it can be used to facilitate greater participation and empowerment of local resource users in the long term (Scurrah 2013: 45–47).

Along with these approaches in engagement with the state, the researcher will focus on social movements and communities’ counter-knowledge production along the Salween borderlands. It is proposed that these strategies create a site of negotiation for the purpose of initiating dialogue with state power. As shown in the case of rural communities in Northeastern Thailand, the *Isan* people have embraced the concept of *khwamcharoen*: committing oneself to the pursuit of progress—improvement in living conditions in the village (Keyes 2014: 156). Even though they have been strongly influenced by ‘development’ discourse originating from the

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<sup>1</sup>Baker (2000: 11) mentions that the Assembly of the Poor is a direct result of the development of a new rural political economy that reflected in the background and life-experience of its leaders. The improvement of the road network expands the cheap communications that mean rural people can access to Bangkok by overnight bus. There are also affordable motorcycles. The rural TV broadcast network was rapidly expanded that rural people increasingly owned a TV. Even sons of peasants who had trained as teachers or lawyers returned and supplanted city-based NGO workers and organized the peasantry movement. Many of them had worked outside the village, especially in Bangkok and as overseas migrant labor in the Middle East. Compared to the peasant movement in the Latin America, those who are leading the struggle, travel to the cities, participate in seminars and leadership training schools, and engage in political debates, even as they are rooted in the rural struggle, and engage in agricultural cultivation (Petras 1997: 19–20).

Thai government, rural Northeastern communities have reworked this discourse with reference to their own cultural traditions. With a cosmopolitan vision, they have not only opposed government-sponsored development programs, but also pursued development with the intent of effecting improvements in their standard of living (Keyes 2014: 168–170).

Similarly, Jaremwong (1999) studied the development of the meaning of “rural development” in Northern Thailand. He found that rather than either passively accepting or totally resisting the government-defined meaning of development, villagers possess their own vision of development. Since the 1980s, the meaning of development as defined by the state has shifted from state-sponsored infrastructure and construction to the distribution of economic benefits with people’s participation. As a result, villagers fully accepted projects that responded to their needs, and only passively accepted projects with only partial benefits to them. Through various measures, both interpretive and otherwise, they adjusted unprofitable projects in a way that was more gainful to communities, both in the short and the long term (Jaremwong 1999, 2001).

#### **11.4 Targeting the Salween Borderlands: Civilizing the Margins by the States**

The Salween borderlands, which are marginal spaces of both the Thai and Myanmar states, have been modernized, or ‘civilized,’ by both governments (Bryant 1997). Civilizing the margins (Duncan 2004) induces dramatic modernization in the Salween borderlands. I take development as referring to the raising of people’s standard of living, but development projects also reinforce the beliefs that those defined as in need of development are primitives, further reinforcing them as subjects in need of development. This is also embedded in the state policies from which the drive for modern development stems. In the case of the Salween dams, the main actors in this process are powerful transnational companies and state-owned enterprises, which are increasing the commodification of nature (MacLean 2008; Nevins/Peluso 2008). This section discusses the process of commodification of the Salween River at the borderlands as a means of civilizing the margins, embedded in the wider political context of neo-liberalism at the Thai-Myanmar border.

In 1988 the Thai Prime Minister, General Chatichai Choonhawan, initiated an economic vision to transform Indochina from a “battlefield into a marketplace.” This turning point brought capitalist development to the Thai-Myanmar border regions (Battersby 1999: 479). By 2003, the Thai government was engaged in bilateral cooperation with Myanmar on four mega-projects: the Tasang Dam on the Salween River, to be constructed by Thailand’s MDX company; a coal mine in a Myanmar town opposite Prachuap Khiri Khan, Thailand; a port project in Dawei; and a Mae Sot-Yangon road project (Fawthrop 2003). Despite the fact that these development projects would affect the livelihoods of local people, the villagers

were not informed about the projects by the Thai or the Myanmar governments. Most of the people interviewed for this study, for example, did not possess clear information about the Salween dam projects. The information they did receive was from NGOs rather than state actors.

Since the 1970s, dam developers have proposed to build large dams on the Salween River. These projects are currently being developed by companies from Thailand, China, and Myanmar. The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand International (EGATi), Chinese corporations and Myanmar investors have joined to develop plans and proceed with the development of a number of hydroelectric dams on Myanmar's stretch of the Salween River (see Middleton et al., Chap. 3, this volume). This includes several projects, such as the Weigyi, Dagwin, and Hatgyi dams.

Two of the projects proposed along the border, Weigyi and Dagwin, have been delayed and potentially cancelled. Hatgyi, however, is still under consideration. The proposed Hatgyi Dam is a large dam at 1360 MW. The project investors are EGATi, Sinohydro Corporation, Myanmar's Department of Hydropower Planning (DHPP), and the Myanmar private investor International Group of Entrepreneur Company (IGOEC) (EGATi 2010; Salween Watch 2014). Hatgyi would be located on the Salween River, in Karen State, Myanmar not far downstream from the Thai border where this research was conducted.

The project has been met with strong opposition from civil society, with both local, regional and international groups joining in protests against Hatgyi and other Salween dams (Nang Shining 2011: 26–30; TERRA 2007; Salween Watch 2014). Opponents assert that the project should not move ahead based solely on the decisions of the state and private sector without the participation of local people. The project has been characterized by a lack of information disclosure (Chantawong 2011; TERRA 2007). Local people on both sides of the border are concerned about cross border impacts on local ecology and fisheries, and the inundation of residential areas and farmlands along the Salween River. The Myanmar government is supporting the Hatgyi Dam project as part of a strategy to remove ethnic armed groups from the dam site, as the project is to be located in an area of conflict between Karen insurgents, known as the Karen National Union (KNU) and the *Tatmadaw*, the Myanmar military (Nang Shining 2011; Hengsuwan 2013; Simpson 2013).

The Thai state-owned EGAT has issued numerous claims its activities will provide optimum benefits for communities in the long run (EGAT 2009a, cited in Nang Shining 2011: 2). EGAT has conducted a public relations campaign to promote the dam in communities on both sides of the border, and commissioned Chulalongkorn University's Environmental Research Institute to conduct an EIA of the Hatgyi Dam, which was completed in 2008. Although the dam developer EGATi promises to support affected communities, the Thai National Human Rights Commission proposed that the Thai government order EGATi to abandon plans to build the Hatgyi Dam (NGO-CORD North 2007, 2008). However, in 2009, Abhisit's government recommended further studies, and refused to stop the Hatgyi Dam project (Salween Watch 2010). In the recent years, EGAT has continued to

push the project forward by asking KNU leaders to concede to EGAT's demands to conduct surveys at the dam site. Most recently, EGAT and a Chinese team have conducted new research in the area. Meanwhile, there has been increased militarization by the Myanmar army around the dam sites (Lambrecht 2000, 2004). EGAT has also approached local people in an effort to convince them to agree to the project (Salween Watch Coalition 2016).

The Salween dam projects – both inside Myanmar and on the Thai-Myanmar border, are being developed by Chinese-backed companies, state-owned Thai enterprises, and Myanmar companies, with backup from the Myanmar military in sensitive border regions. Development discourse is being used by states and energy investors as an entry point to turn the river into hydro-electricity for trade.

On the Thai side, the government has run community development projects, such as infrastructure development and construction of a health center and a school, and is framing the projects as an expansion of regional power development along the Salween borderlands. However, these projects are not simply good or bad. As Duncan (2004: 18) points out, “development projects are not the benign empowerment schemes that they claim to be, nor are they the all-powerful machines of ethnocide and cultural destruction that many activists claim.” The minorities' choice between incorporation into government projects or resistance to government schemes depends on the particular context. In this case, local people in Thailand have chosen to participate in community development projects, but are resisting the Salween dam projects. This implies that the Thai state is not able to exert total control over populations on the border. Salween residents are prepared to confront the Thai government if they perceive that the Salween dams will be disruptive to their livelihoods and security.

International financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and transnational energy investors also use regional energy security as a rationale to justify the Salween dam projects through power development projects such as the GMS Power Grid (ADB 2006). GMS countries also follow this theme: every state should think about its national power security and make plans for national power development (Middleton et al. 2009). These states-plus-capitalists have legitimized power over the Salween. They have identified the function of the Salween River as a source of energy, one used to serve the nations' and the region's prosperity. For this reason, they have attempted to impede local resource management and take control of the Salween River through the discourse of development and regional energy security. The way that states and international financial institutions envision power sharing and regional power trade is contested, however. Civil society groups continuously challenge international financial institutions, particularly the ADB, at the regional level, while at the same time challenging states to improve their national power development plans and energy projections.

Whether or not the Salween dams will be built depends neither upon the intention of local people nor that of individual states. Decision-making power is, rather, held by a combination of various parties. Transnational dam investors must therefore seek alternative ways to convince local people to acquiesce to dam construction. Several kinds of development are being introduced into the Salween



borderlands in an effort to convince local people to agree to the Salween dams. Therefore, alternative development as conducted by states/capitalists has become a depoliticized program operating as a development apparatus to expand bureaucratic state power (Ferguson 2003). However, the Salween dam projects are still widely opposed by residents along the Thai-Myanmar border.

## 11.5 Life and Development in Local Communities

Remote Salween communities do not receive much attention from the central Thai government. Infrastructure development projects are slowly being introduced into villages. The main road from Mae Sariang and Sob Moei District is of poor quality, and poor infrastructure makes it difficult for villagers to travel during the rainy season. Local water supplies are limited. Bon Bea Luang village enjoys higher infrastructure development than Saw Myin Dong and Muang Mean villages due to its central location, and several government offices have been set up there, including the National Park Unit and the main check point of the Border Patrol Soldier Unit. However, local people face difficulties due to limited residential and agricultural land, low incomes, and minimal health services.

The lives of border people are threatened by Thailand's natural resource conservation policies. Both a wildlife sanctuary and a national park have been established at the Thai-Myanmar border, where many small communities have settled down in forest areas along Salween tributaries. The forestlands around these villages are now part of the Salween National Park and Forest Reserve, posing conflicts with government authorities such as national park officers and foresters over resources use (Bunditderdsakul 2013, Chap. 9, this volume, and Lamb/Roth 2018). These authorities tend to perceive of local people as destroyers of the forest. Local residents must therefore struggle for their right to continue living in protected forest areas. The villagers see this as their most urgent problem, with no immediate solution pending.

Villagers in two communities I conducted research in, Saw Myin Dong and Muang Mean, expressed that they are proud of their lives because they have plenty of rice and fish. Most of them do rotational shifting cultivation and a few do paddy cultivation to produce rice for consumption. They also catch a lot of fish in the Salween and Moei rivers and gather wild plants and animals from the forest. Their livelihoods rely on the abundance of aquatic and forest resources. However, they are worried about the proposed Salween dam projects, particularly the environmental and social impacts of the Hatgyi Dam downstream. I observed that local people are particularly concerned that Hatgyi Dam would cause flooding and inadequate/unstable water levels in the river, which would prevent them from cultivating crops along the riverbanks. The river ecosystem would change, potentially causing the extinction of a number of local fish species. Additionally, affected people from many villages inside Myanmar would have to resettle, causing further displacement. Due to these concerns, the villagers have resisted the Salween dam

projects through engagement in the anti-Salween dams movement, involvement in public participation processes under the Abhisit Government, and by undertaking Thai Baan research as a means of counter-knowledge production.

## **11.6 Civil Society and Communities Resisting the Hatgyi Dam Project**

Local communities and the state have had a long-term engagement over broader issues of development of the borderlands. The issue of the Salween dams is a recent one, and one of many ways that the state and community have interacted. In resisting the Salween dams, local residents regularly interact with national and international civil society groups that are concerned about the environmental and human rights impacts of these projects. These civil society groups have mobilized a broader anti-Salween dam movement, and brought increased awareness of the potential environmental and social impacts of the dams to affected communities.

Coalitions of NGOs, including Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), NGO-CORD North, Salween Watch and Living Rivers Siam (SEARIN), have organized several forums and debates on the Salween hydropower projects in Thailand, communicating with state parties, particularly the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRCT), to urge the government to order EGAT to stop the Hatgyi Dam and other Salween dam projects (NGO-CORD North 2011; TERRA 2007). This coalition of NGOs persuaded the NHRCT to scrutinize the Hatgyi Dam project in light of potential human rights and environment impacts. The issue of increased militarization at the upper dam construction site was noted as potentially exacerbating fighting between Myanmar soldiers and the KNU, which could have implications for the Thai government as refugees flee from the Myanmar side into Thailand (Nang Shining 2011: 30).

By collaborating with local, national, and international NGOs, local communities have organized their own Salween River Basin Network, consisting of 21 river basin management organizations across seven districts in Mae Hong Son Province, Tha Song Yang District and Tak Province (Nang Shining 2011: 30). They have conducted their campaigns in many ways, through rallies and protests, by collecting significant information, and submitting petition letters to relevant organizations and authorities. They submitted petition letters to the NHRCT and the Thai government, requesting the cancellation of the Hatgyi Hydropower Dam project (NGOs-CORD North 2008).

In 2009, the NHRCT submitted letters to the PM office to urge the government to halt the Hatgyi dam project for 90 days and a committee was formed to investigate potential human rights and environmental violations. Afterwards, the Information Disclosure Subcommittee on the Hatgyi Hydropower Project on the Salween River was set up to collect information and make recommendations to the Prime Minister. A coalition of organizations representing communities living along

the Salween River in Myanmar and Thailand submitted a letter to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva calling for the Hatgyi Dam to be stopped immediately (Salween Watch Coalition 2011; Nang Shining 2011: 28–32).

Moreover, local representatives made recommendations to the Information Disclosure Subcommittee of the Hatgyi Hydropower Project on the Salween River and submitted a letter to the Prime Minister and Chairman of the Committee for the Investigation of Human Rights Violations regarding information disclosure and public hearings for the Hatgyi Dam (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand International 2010; Salween Watch 2010). In 2011, EGATi held a public information disclosure meeting following the recommendations of the NHRCT. Despite this intervention by the sub-committee, the planning of the Hatgyi Dam has continued after Prime Minister Yinluck Shinawatra came to power in 2011. However, the subsequent military coup saw the military take power in May 2014 and the sub-committee was no more (Salween Watch Coalition 2016; Thepgumpanat/Tanakasempipat 2017).

There is still interest from the Thai government, however. The Thai government has expressed that it wants to continue energy cooperation with the Myanmar government and Aung San Suu Kyi insisted that the Thai government continue cooperation on the dam project during her visit in June 2016 (Prachachat 2016; Public Statement 2016). EGATi is willing to invest more than 100 billion baht in Hatgyi project. In addition to the dam project, the Thai government also expects to build a pumping station to divert water to the Bhumibol dam to alleviate drought in Central Thailand. Mr. Watchara Hemratchatanan, the president of EGATi, is on the record as expressing support, and that “we need to wait and see the Myanmar government and its negotiation with ethnic groups” (Prachachat 2016).

### ***11.6.1 Villagers Conduct Thai Baan Research***

As mentioned above, Thai Baan research carried out by villagers was an alternative to conventional research. In collaboration with SEARIN and a local NGO, Salween communities conducted Thai Baan Research with the initial findings released as a book in 2005 (Committee of Researchers of the Salween Sgaw Karen 2005). They attempted to involve local government in the research, and made the results of the study available to the Mae Hong Son provincial government, especially findings around various fish species found in the Salween and its tributaries. An additional Salween Study was conducted in 2005 through collaboration with the Foundation for Ecological Recovery based in Bangkok, the Mae Yuam Civic Group in Mae Sariang District, and representatives of Salween communities. The Salween Study compiled information on the socio-cultural and economic significance of the Salween River (Chantawong/Longcharoen 2007: 23).

The Thai Baan Research found 70 fish species in the Salween River and its tributaries (Committee of Researchers of the Salween Sgaw Karen 2005) and the

Salween Study identified up to 83 species of fish and aquatic animals. Some are endemic and rare species (Chantawong/Longcharoen 2007). Moreover, previous studies conducted by fishery experts identified at least 170 fish species in the Salween River Basin, many of them endemic. According to fishery experts, there could be between 200 and 500 species of fish in the Salween Basin (Chantawong/Longcharoen 2007: 26). The biodiversity and ecology of the Salween River Basin would be severely affected if the Salween dams were built, with drastic consequences for local people's livelihoods.

In line with other findings on local knowledge (i.e., Agrawal 1995, 2002; Laungaramsri 2001) this local knowledge has also been used in a range of ways. It is used by villagers to express their views and engage with government institutions to influence development planning and decision-making processes. Or, as Lamb (2018: 1–2) explains, “local knowledge is an agentive tool for communities to critique and find alternatives to status quo development schemes, which overlook resources users and their knowledge, but that in some ways the focus on the ‘local’ in local knowledge elides or limits that same struggle for representation.” In my analysis, having voiced strong concern around the potential loss of their livelihoods, Salween communities are through these publications represented as ‘anti-dam.’ Although these communities are or may be anti-dam, however, they are not against development. The next section shows how villagers have tactically negotiated development with state agencies and NGOs, defining ‘development’ on their own terms and expressing their own demands.

### 11.6.2 *The Villagers and khwamcharoen*

The development of hydropower dams on the Salween River is one of many broader development issues that border communities have engaged in with the state. It is difficult to judge to what extent local people are being governed by the state.<sup>2</sup> Although they express determination and have proposed their own models for future livelihoods and community development, as seen in some of the local knowledge publications, this does not mean that villagers in Thailand reject government assistance or intervention.

The Salween borderlands are marginal zones, where both the central Thai and Myanmar governments try to exert control over their respective citizens and territories. As this chapter focuses on the Thai side, it is important to ask: how do local

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<sup>2</sup>In modern Thai usage, the word can be made into a noun by adding the prefix ‘khwam’ [–ness], and the word *charoen* can be found in the 14th century and probably earlier. In the old sense, it means cultivating, growing, increasing, building up or expanding until complete in a positive sense, which applied mostly to nonmaterial matters. However, its meaning is changed in 19th century to imply secular or worldly development, material progress, and technological advance. Therefore, the emphasis of *charoen* is on material conditions, such as paved roads, electricity, machines, and modern buildings (Winichakul 2000: 531).

people perceive of the Thai state and its activities, and why are they unable to reject the state? For the local people, the Thai state plays an important role in the improvement of their wellbeing, even as it takes control of their territory.

Local people want to improve their difficult living conditions, such as poor roads, lack of agricultural and residential land, limited access to forestland and lack of citizenship status; they need the state and local government's help to improve these conditions. This section examines how local people articulate their own concept of development as self-proclaimed subjects. Of particular consideration are improvements in local infrastructure, access to basic services, citizenship, historical linkages with the Thai King, and disaster response.

### ***11.6.3 Local Infrastructure and Basic Services***

Transportation is a common concern among local people, particularly in Saw Myin Dong and Muang Mean. Both these villages are located far from paved roads, and boat travel can be limited and difficult, depending on season, time of day (no travel allowed after dark), and depending on security issues. Ai Srithong, a resident of Saw Myin Dong, stated that the quality of the roads in Muang Mean is low: "The concrete road in the village was built ten years ago. Riding a motorcycle to Bon Bea Luang village takes four hours, or three hours by car, but only one hour by boat. Unfortunately, there is no public transportation here."

Road construction is linked to local politics of development, as discussed between Ai Srithong and Sowan, a research assistant, in February 2010:

Sowan: "Did people attempt to find money to improve the road? Was there any proposal submitted to the government?"

Ai Srithong: "Yes, we submitted a proposal to the Sub-district Administrative Organisation (TAO). Only a small caterpillar machine came. I asked them to expand the road along the sharp curves, but they could not do it because there was no machine big enough... They didn't bring a good one. So, the road is still not good. It was okay when they first repaired it, but it collapsed during a day of heavy rain in the rainy season. People travelling here have to bring digging tools along with them. They sometimes have to push and pull motorcycles stuck in the mud."

For these villagers, paving the road is a good project, but they are suspicious about whether it will actually begin, even when they see construction workers come to survey in nearby villages.

### ***11.6.4 Citizenship***

The main concern of the state is security, and the military takes the role of national protector, as evidenced at military checkpoints along the border on both the Thai

and Myanmar sides of the Salween River. One of the political tools used by the state to control its subjects is the granting or denial of citizenship. Internal borders are manipulated by new alliances of border polities; district officials, sub-district and village heads (Sakboon 2011). Villagers perceive citizenship as a means to access basic social services, such as health care and education, as well the right to live in Thailand (Grundy-Warr/Wong Siew Yin 2002; Sakboon 2011: 229; Hengsuwan 2017: 92).

Nevertheless, advocating for citizenship rights is an uneasy process for border residents due to registration and procedures that are tactically exploited by state agencies at a local level, including district officials, sub-district and village heads. These state officials have the power and authority to enforce policy and approve or deny villagers' applications, and manipulate citizenship registration laws and processes as an apparatus to control and abuse local residents. As a result, villagers must find alliances and networks to gain more bargaining power in negotiations for citizenship, and a provocative ally are the local NGOs (Sakboon 2011: 235–240).

Villagers in the Salween borderlands have long struggled to obtain citizenship. Data collected by a local NGO in 2016 shows that nearly half of the residents of three villages are stateless people (about 1,452 out of 3,352 people). In July 2016, the researcher talked to Lung Jai, a Muslim resident of Bon Bea Luang village, regarding these matters. His main concern is citizenship. He said:

I often see villagers with no ID cards, and they cannot use Thai language to communicate with outsiders. They are questioned by the authorities regarding whether or not they are Thai, and are often arrested. So, I think that Thai language is an important skill to make officials understand us, and I've been learning to speak and write Thai language for two years. I've continued to improve my knowledge, reading books about law and citizenship, and attaining NGO trainings. After I was appointed a leader of the Muslim community in 2008, I worked with local NGOs to help stateless villagers attain legal status and to register for Thai citizenship. Now I am retired and a new leader is working on this issue, since a lot of us still don't have Thai citizenship.

As Lung Jai mentioned, local NGOs play a crucial role in building cooperation and connecting villagers to district officials. This has led to advances in the citizenship process. Noh La, a Karen woman NGO activist, stated that in 2016, 476 villagers from three villages had received Thai ID cards, but 976 villagers were still stateless. Noh La herself is a local resident who has accessed education and transformed into an NGO activist. Although the citizenship registration process is going better than in the past, by 2016 only one-third of surveyed villagers had received Thai ID cards.

### ***11.6.5 Village Histories and Relationship with the King of Thailand***

Another means of gaining recognition by the Thai state is by identifying yourself or your village as a state subject through village history (see also, Lamb 2014a). The

late King Bhumibol visited the Salween border area three times between 1960 and 1970 in relation to national security concerns. Pa Te Sae Yi, a resident of Muang Mean village, recalled the first time the late King of Thailand visited:

I don't remember the exact year, as I was a young child, but my mother and father remember clearly. When the King visited us, this was still a small village of only 5-7 houses. The only way to make a living at that time was by doing rotational farming in the mountains. So the King granted a royal patronage, meaning government money, to dig two irrigation canals so we could do lowland rice farming. Those two canals are still in use today.

He was touched by the late king's mercy, saying that the late King saw the difficulty the villagers faced and wanted to support them to do lowland rice farming. After the King's visit, the government brought new development projects to the Salween communities, building public health clinics and schools, as well as support from the police and the border patrol. Villagers believe that their quality of life improved after the King's visits, as the government came to recognize them as Thai subjects. Hence, this is applying a politics of belonging in relation to the late King and the state.

### ***11.6.6 Disaster Response***

Bon Bea Luang village is located in the foothills on a tiny piece of flat land along the Salween, as the villagers have not been allowed to settle further inland. The houses are built in a row, close to one other, along a narrow road. Due to the lack of land, the front rooms of the houses protrude onto the edge of the road. A view at the back of these houses shows that they are perched precariously on high wooden poles above a deep creek.

This is a dangerous place to live, particularly in the rainy season when the villagers face erosion and flooding. In 2009, Nongnut, a Shan resident of Bon Bea Luang, said that in the rainy season, a mass of water ran down the mountainsides, causing severe erosion and sweeping away the houses located near the stream. More than ten houses were ruined. Until now, the Karen and Shan families who lost their homes have not received any land to build new houses. The local government came to help them later, by offering some financial support.

"The affected families had to move to stay with their relatives. No official came to provide them land. They didn't know where to build new homes. My mom also moved to stay at my relative's house. TAO staff eventually came to help them, giving each family amount 30,000 baht. But my mom received only 21,500 baht, and no land," said Nongnut.

In 2011 and 2015, many villages located in mountainous zones in Mae Hong Son Province, including Bon Bea Luang village, were severely affected by heavy rains, floods, and landslides. As the case of Bon Bea Luang shows, affected villagers had no choice but to move in with relatives. They want to expand their

communities and build homes in safer areas, but there is no space available. The forestlands surrounding the village are protected areas where the state does not allow them to settle. In my observations, this has meant that the state has pushed them onto increasingly marginal land. For this reason, villagers have joined the land rights movement, advocating for community rights and engaging in the on-going process of land field surveys and map digitization. They hope it will give them the legal right to settle in better, less marginal land, in the future.

All of these efforts demonstrate that the villagers are actually pro-development, however, development (in Thai: *khwamcharoen*) must take place on their own terms. Local people have long negotiated development that they identify as *khwamcharoen* based on their experiences, and serving their own vision, which is different from that of the state and the dam developers. The next section shows how communities reject development when it comes from a source they do not trust, and when they worry that agreeing to this development will be perceived as sanctioning the dam projects.

## 11.7 Negotiating *khwamcharoen*: EGAT and the State

This section argues that the state and dam developers use ‘modern-ness’ as a discourse of development to convince local communities to accept the Salween dam projects. EGAT tries to persuade villagers to acquiesce to their vision of development (*khwamcharoen*) through donations and other incentives. Local communities’ relationship with EGAT shows that these communities are anti-dam but not anti-development, as villagers want development on their own terms. First we will examine how EGAT has sought to work in Thai communities via its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Programme, when faced with strong civil society resistance to usher in development of the Hatgyi and Weigyi projects.

Local communities, however, widely conclude that this is not a sincere effort to bring development to their areas, but a trick to persuade them to support the dam projects. We will then examine how communities have sought to negotiate with the state over a longer period to bring ‘development’ to their communities on their own terms.

### 11.7.1 EGAT and *khwamcharoen*

The state-owned EGAT has played a major role in feeding Thailand’s energy demand for the past five decades. Its privilege is embedded in its national duty to drive the country to the *khwamcharoen*. The nation’s progress and EGAT’s profit are intertwined. Hence, EGAT has begun to invest in neighboring countries, Laos in particular. Thailand receives advantages from this outbound investment, obtaining less expensive electric power and electricity system security and avoiding



indebtedness from international loans for dam construction that would affect Thai natural resources (Prasityuseel 2001: ix).

EGAT publicly claims that they promote CSR to support society, communities, and the environment. “EGAT has strictly observed all applicable laws and regulations in all processes of its operations and activities, both before and during the project development and throughout the operating life of its power facilities. Particular emphasis has been placed on the implementation of all environmental and social impact prevention and mitigation measures as well as environmental monitoring programs” (Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand 2009a: 76–77). CSR appears to be good in theory, but it has not been successfully applied in practice. EGAT engaged in very limited CSR during the preparation process of the Hatgyi Dam project (Nang Shining 2011: 92). EGAT donated money to environmental conservation projects and tried to show that they care for the environment, but they still exploit natural resources through their large-scale projects. EGAT ramped up CSR activities in local communities to create an image of a socially conscious and ethical business (Nang Shining 2011; Vathanavisuth 2009).

EGAT also tries to work indirectly in communities. As Mr. Pornchai Rujiprapha, secretary-general of the Ministry of Energy and the governor of EGAT stated, “EGAT has designated 120 million baht (US\$3.6 million) to assist in public health, education and employment for local villagers in the Salween dam area” (Sai Silp 2007). In reality, this is part of EGAT’s mass propaganda effort (*karn tam mounchon*). As Nang Shining, a civil society activist, put it, “research findings reveal that EGAT international has exercised a philanthropic approach to community investment as its CSR activity, which villagers felt was undertaken to sway those opposed to the dam project” (Nang Shining 2011: 92).

At the local level, as part of its CSR strategy, EGAT has tried in many ways to gain access to communities in order to persuade them to support the Salween dam projects. Where the villagers are poor, EGAT uses *khwamcharoen* and the King’s sufficiency economy theory as ideological tools to approach Salween communities. EGAT persuaded local people to join their sufficiency agriculture program, which included such activities as producing organic fertilizer and dishwashing liquid. Local leader Ai Chamnan said,

EGAT (*karnfaifah*) is not involved with making *khwamcharoen*, but it intervenes to support the TAO with money to run activities, particularly agricultural activities such as catfish farms (*liangpladuk*), and making biological fermented liquid (*nammakchewapap*). This allows EGAT to promote its name in helping communities.

In 2008, EGAT provided books and other materials to the school in Saw Myin Dong village. This resulted in disagreements among villagers over supporting EGAT because the villagers were skeptical of EGAT’s long-term tactics. Ai Chamnan said:

There were public health mobile services in Saw Myin Dong village two or three years ago. The first time a medical team came here we accepted it. Villagers came to use the service. The second time, they came again. We wondered where the doctors come from. A doctor said that EGAT hired them to travel from Mae Sariang Hospital to start the mobile service.

All of the funding came from EGAT. So the villagers rejected it. They didn't come to use the services once they understood that it was EGAT's trick.

EGAT also establishes good relationships with government officials. They were also suspected of having connections to high-level military personnel in order to use soldiers to coerce villagers to give in to EGAT's plans. Many residents in the community, including a villager named Ai Sanong, alleged that EGAT was providing funding to official departments that work closely with the community, including the education department and the military.

Lung Sanit, a Karen elder of Saw Myin Dong, also confirmed that soldiers based in the village tried to coerce the villagers to accept the Salween dam projects in 2008. Lung Sanit remembers well what the soldiers often said to villagers: the government will bring development to you. You should not resist.

In July 2009, I met Ai Sanan, a local Thai Karen activist, and Ai Chamnan, involved in supporting local people to protect their rights and natural resources. They have engaged in a number of anti-Salween dam campaign activities. I discussed the matter of EGAT's public relations strategies in local areas with them. Ai Sanan said:

EGAT is trying to gather mass support (*duengmounchon*) for the Hatgyi dam in the Thai-Burmese [Myanmar] border zones. Last year, they gave people on the Burma side mosquito nets. Once people realized that the mosquito nets were from EGAT, they sent hundreds of them back to show that they rejected EGAT.

Ai Chamnan then told me this story:

Making *khwamcharoen* through organizations for villagers happened in the past. Villagers knew that EGAT helped to develop the village, so if EGAT wanted to construct a dam, they would have to agree with EGAT's plans. That was EGAT's aim. They are very clever... Most villagers and government officials thought that the dam was good because it would produce electricity for us. Villagers said, 'the dam brings *khwamcharoen* to our villages. Why are you against that?' I argued 'what does *khwamcharoen* mean? It means money, right? People in Mae Sariang, for instance, used to receive money from logging the Salween forests. Where did the money go? They no longer have money. The meaning of *khwamcharoen* is sustainable development. When we explained that to the villagers, they understood better. The dam project will be approved if we don't oppose it. However, it is difficult to oppose it because the decision-making process is not transparent. If we do not struggle, they will build it.

In brief, EGAT has tried to persuade local people to agree to dam construction on the Salween by exercising a philanthropic strategy within local communities at the Thai-Myanmar border and swaying them away from opposing dam construction. Due to widespread resistance to the dam projects, EGAT has publicly promoted their CSR strategy to support good work for society, communities, and the environment. At the local level, EGAT has tried many ways to gain access to communities in order to persuade villagers to support the Salween dam projects. EGAT has also used *khwamcharoen* and the King's 'sufficiency economy' theory to approach communities by persuading villagers to join their development initiatives.

However, local communities are very concerned about the Salween dams. They are suspicious of the notion of dams as a means to achieve national development, and thus understand EGAT's tricks and tend to not support EGAT's CSR program. Villagers continue resisting large dam projects because of concerns over losing access to local resources, and they are also negotiating *khwamcharoen* to initiate community development on their own terms. The next section will analyze how development is negotiated, examining how villager-led *khwamcharoen* and EGAT-led *khwamcharoen* have been articulated.

## 11.8 Analysis: Villagers, the Thai State and Power Relations

The uneven power relations are evident when considering where does this electricity come from and who bears the costs. Lung Kaew's view is that dams and *khwamcharoen* are related. Large dams generate electricity, and then electricity makes *khwamcharoen* possible. Because of this, conflicts occur not only at the village level, but also at higher levels.

In addition, electricity projects can cause or exacerbate conflict in the village, ethnic conflicts in particular. The villagers are aware that they live in poor and risky conditions, and are denied rights and opportunities such as citizenship, access to state services, and legal land tenure. Villagers view the Thai state as a development-centric state that provides them with development based on the notion of material progress. They think that the state should be involved in improving the quality of their lives. Hence, they focus on material progress, which causes them to put their faith in the state. However, they still question the consequences of development projects, in which the idea of *khwamcharoen* is embedded. They worry that development projects might disrupt their traditional livelihoods and quality of life. For this reason, villagers request specific kinds of development that they feel will benefit them. They selectively accept or reject development programs introduced by the government and supported by local NGOs. As a result, knowledge production is a contested terrain that both pro-dam and anti-dam sides use to claim legitimacy and power over Salween resources (Vaddhanaphuti 2004; Scurrah 2013; Lamb 2014a).

## 11.9 Conclusions

Salween villagers are frequently represented as anti-development due to their widespread opposition to the Salween dam projects, which threaten their communities and livelihoods. Labeling Salween communities as anti-development is an oversimplification, however. Of course, they oppose the Salween dams due to the

potential environmental and social impacts of these projects. However, a more sophisticated tool used by local communities is to negotiate with state agencies to assert their legitimacy as Thai subjects. They do this by narrating their communities' history of belonging to the Thai state, and by working with local NGOs to gain Thai citizenship. This is not simply participation in rural improvement projects initiated by the government agencies as Walker (2012) and Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (2013) mention, but is rather strategic (Lamb 2014a). The more the villagers engage with anti-Salween dam and land rights movements run by NGOs, the more support they get from those NGOs. They also negotiate with the local government to get support and gain benefits from community development. This chapter shows how villages have had a far longer engagement with the state, which can also be understood as linking the 'state' to the borderlands (Lamb 2014b). Therefore, they have been involved in long-term negotiations over development, both local and national. Salween communities are not anti-development, in this view, but rather seek development on their own terms.

Nevertheless, Salween villagers with connections to NGOs tend to be simplistically framed as anti-dam and thus anti-development. As the villagers oppose the Salween dam projects, the Thai and Myanmar states and the transnational companies, particularly EGAT, have attempted to reduce and/or remove this resistance. The Thai state and EGAT have also introduced alternative development as a discourse to expand their power over the Salween borderlands, making the local people submissive and swaying them from opposition to dam construction activities along the Salween. Some individuals, and organizations, use *khwamcharoen* and the Thai King's 'sufficiency economy' theory to approach border communities and persuade them to join their development programs. Corporate Social Responsibility is publicly promoted by EGAT to develop a good image for the company, and EGAT exercises a philanthropic strategy within local communities. These discursive practices bely the high level of exclusion inherent in the Salween dam projects, which would turn the Salween River into a source of hydro-electricity and exclude border people from accessing the Salween's resources.

When dams come to signify development, anti-dam communities are simplistically framed as anti-development. Salween communities are in fact much more sophisticated than frequently represented, and participation in the anti-dam movement is one of a number of arenas through which communities are seeking local development. Local communities have attempted to engage in development production by proposing community development initiatives based on their own desires and in accordance with their traditional livelihoods, and by participating in a number of movements to improve their lives. Individuals and communities have engaged with land rights movements and networks, and in struggles for citizenship rights.

As Keyes (2014: 172) points out, villagers in Thailand have reworked the discourse on 'development' to be meaningful with reference to their own experience, and challenge government policies that tend to obstruct their interests, or policies imposed on them without consultation. Local communities see their participation in the anti-dam movement as a strategy to improve local development. Participation in the anti-Salween dam movement is one of the villagers' many strategies to

articulate their own meaning of local development. Therefore, it is necessary that we reposition the anti-dam movement as not a singular movement, but as a wider network of movements surrounding local development. While the anti-dam movement is often positioned as issue-based, this chapter proposes that we instead position the movement as one that is directly related to other issues of interest to local communities. Local villagers are flexible in their thinking, taking into account a wide array of influences on their livelihoods at the same time. Their anti-dam campaign activities must thus be understood in relation to other community initiatives. Communities are not simply anti-dam; they selectively accept or reject development on their own terms.

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