

Poverty and Agrarian-Forest Interactions in Thailand

ROBERT FISHER* and PHILIP HIRSCH

School of Geosciences, Madsen Building (FO9), University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

**Corresponding author. Email: rjfisher@ozemail.com.au*

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Abstract

In this paper we address the often sterile and circular debates over relationships between poverty and deforestation. These debates revolve around questions of whether forest loss causes poverty or poverty contributes to forest encroachment, and questions of whether it is loss of access to forests or dependence on forest-based livelihoods that cause poverty. We suggest that a way beyond the impasse is to set such debates within the context of agrarian change. Livelihoods of those who live in or near forests depend considerably on a rapidly changing agriculture, yet agrarian contexts receive only background attention in popular, political and academic discourse over poverty and forests. Moreover, to the extent that agriculture is considered, little heed is paid to social, technical and economic change. We therefore address agriculture's changing relationships with the wider economy, otherwise referred to as the agrarian transition, and with the natural resource base on which it depends. The paper draws on the experience of Thailand to illustrate our key argument, and more specifically addresses the situation on the resource periphery through a look at the agriculture-forest interface.

KEY WORDS *agrarian transition; resource periphery; agriculture-forest interactions; Thailand; livelihoods; poverty; environmentalism; community forestry*

ACRONYMS

NTFP Non-timber Forest Product
RFD Royal Forest Department (Thailand)

Introduction

The relationship between poverty and deforestation has been the subject of much popular discussion, eco-political debate and scholarly enquiry. Studies of the relationship between poor people and forests have been carried out at a number of levels from local to global. They take both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Three broad directions of argument underlie such

discussion, debate and inquiry. One holds that tropical forests disappear because of the need for the poor in developing countries – where most of those forests are located – to eke out a living, or because the backward agricultural practices of the poor are destructive of bio-diverse forest environments. Shifting cultivation, pejoratively referred to as 'slash and burn', is a particular target. The second holds that forest

destruction by loggers and other external resource claimants itself is a cause of poverty as forest-dependent peoples lose access to their principal source of sustenance and as upper watershed forest destruction leads to dessication (drying out of soils and streams) and other impacts on the 'environmental services' that downstream farmers rely on. The third position holds that restricted access to remaining forest resources due to lack of tenure and intensified state control of forests in response to deforestation leads to the poverty of forest dependent people.

While the popular, political and academic discourse often acknowledges the basis of poor people's livelihoods in farming, a consideration of agrarian change is missing from much of the portrayal. Farming practices and livelihood dependence are all too often assumed as a given and rather static background aspect of livelihood, while the emphasis remains on forests and poverty. Yet there are clearly problems with such an analysis, best illustrated by some recent conceptual work based around rural studies in Thailand, a country whose dramatic loss of forests has been associated with agricultural expansion and whose equally dramatic transitions in agriculture and trends in forest cover make for a highly relevant case study. Yet discourses on livelihoods do not take these transitions sufficiently into account. As Walker (2004) has suggested, for example, the discursive 'arboresalisation' of livelihood is a distortion of the relative dependence on farming and forest-based sustenance. Rigg (2001) goes even further to suggest that rural livelihoods are much 'more than the soil' – and by implication more than the natural resource base including forests – as people's incomes and livelihood priorities are diversified and 'interpenetrated' (Rigg 1998) with urban occupations.

In this paper, we seek to bring nuance to debates on forest-poverty interactions by focusing on the ways in which agricultural livelihoods mediate this relationship. More specifically, we look at contexts of agrarian change – and the more general notion of agrarian transition – at the agriculture-forest interface. The following section identifies this interface as part of what we term the 'resource periphery'. We base our discussion on Thailand, and show how agrarian transitions have increasingly become enmeshed with environmental debates including struggles related to resource-based livelihoods. The paper then examines how change in forest cover has been linked with

poverty, both materially and discursively. This is followed by a discussion of the political articulation of tensions at the forest-agriculture interface, particularly around shifting cultivation, protected areas and community forestry. We go on to suggest a need to move beyond the discourses entailed in such politics toward a more poverty- and livelihood-orientated understanding of the implications of forest change. Finally, the article makes a supplementary set of observations on neighbouring countries in the Mekong Region before concluding with some suggestions relevant to the policy process around forest-based livelihoods and poverty.

Poverty, forests and agrarian change at the resource periphery

Debates and discussions on poverty and rural livelihoods occur in the context of the rapid processes of change occurring in agrarian society in the region, especially at the 'resource periphery'. The resource periphery can be defined as a zone of relatively abundant natural forest and land endowment by virtue of limited prior market integration associated with remoteness and inaccessibility. Processes of agricultural intensification and market engagement have shifted or expanded geographically to this resource periphery and are making themselves felt in physically and ecologically marginal environments.

It is increasingly recognised that interactions between forest and agricultural land at the resource peripheries in Thailand and elsewhere in the Mekong Region have implications for the poverty status and livelihoods of rural people. This is particularly true for those living at the agricultural margins. It is also apparent that poverty sometimes has implications for the condition of natural resources. However, while it is obvious that there are connections between forest-agriculture interactions and poverty, the causal nature of these connections is often disputed and usually simplified or even caricatured.

A proper understanding of these connections is a prerequisite for addressing both better forest management and opportunities for poverty reduction, for example through participatory approaches such as community forestry that secure livelihoods through better access to forest resources. Yet these issues cannot be understood simplistically in terms of competing arguments that impoverishment causes environmental degradation, or that environmental degradation causes poverty. Rather, we suggest that debates over the relationships between poverty and

agricultural/forest land issues need to be more carefully nuanced. We also wish to show that the relationships are dynamic and need to be understood in the wider context of what has been described as 'the agrarian transition'. The agrarian transition can be thought of as the processes of social, technical and economic change associated with developments within agriculture. It is also associated with agriculture's changing relationships with the wider economy and society and with the natural resource base upon which it depends.

There is a need, therefore, to set some of the arguments underlying debates about poverty and forests in a wider frame of reference. Of principal concern in such debates are competing positions on the reasons why forest-dependent people are generally poor and whether the poverty is mostly a result of marginalised social and economic status and lack of tenure, or other factors. Can poverty be addressed, or partly addressed, by providing secure access to forest products through programs such as community forestry? Or, do such programs (and dependence on forests) represent some sort of poverty trap? We suggest that, without reference to the interaction between agriculture- and forest-based livelihoods, and changes in the agrarian economy, such debates are too narrowly framed. Part of our aim is to bring some of the international debates about these issues to the specific case of Thailand.

Agrarian changes involve a number of actual or assumed environmental impacts, and as such the wider agrarian transition of which they are a part is increasingly bound up with environmental debates. Such impacts include forest conversion, intensified chemical use, the use of genetically modified organisms, agri-ecological simplification (that is, increased dependency on a smaller number of crop types and varieties), intensified demand for water, floods and droughts based on altered hydrological conditions in catchments, and soil erosion and depletion. Several of these environmental changes are directly relevant to forests. Some of them are also disputed. For example, Walker (2004) questions the persistence of statements about the hydrological importance of forests, 'despite the fact that there is very little evidence supporting the claim that forests help secure downstream water supplies and good evidence that water shortages attributed to forest clearing are caused ... by very significant increases in demand for water' (p. 315).

Environmental aspects of agrarian change have implications for understanding poverty, which is increasingly bound up in competing discourses of sustainability, environmental entitlements and resource access. The community forestry movement, which involves an attempt by people living in or near forests to gain control, or at least increased access to, forests and forest resources, involves discourses which assert the ability of local communities to manage environments sustainably. The environment (particularly forests) is portrayed as a kind of social safety net as well as a source of identity and meaning.

Thailand is a highly relevant case study for understanding the relationships between agricultural and forest land issues for several reasons. Part of the reason for this is Thailand's rather dramatic history of forest clearance from the early 1960s to late 1980s. Among the reasons for looking at Thailand to address the more general problem is that it is a country that has reached a key point in the process of 'forest transition' described by Mather (1992). Mather argues that there is a forest transition in many developed countries 'from a shrinking to an expanding forest area' (p. 367). He concludes that the 'transition appears to be related to a slowing of population growth rates and to changing attitudes and perceptions on the parts of both peoples and governments' (p. 377). He speculates that similar transitions may occur in some developing countries. In Thailand, forest areas appear to have reached the bottom of the J-curve (Perz, 2007, 106) or 'environmental Kuznets curve in forest cover change' (Rudel *et al.*, 2005, 24), and now appear to be beginning to expand. Such change is related to the agrarian transition and changes in the interactions between forests and agriculture.

The resource periphery can be thought of at different scales. At the regional scale is the reshaping of Thailand's Mekong regional neighbours as a resource periphery for forestry and plantations, as well as hydropower, gems and fish, all of which supply Thailand's industrialising economy. Within Thailand it is the interface between forest land and agricultural land. Significant numbers of people in Southeast Asia continue to live on or near forest land, either actual forest, or land that is formally classified as forest. Although there are different ways to define the agriculture/forest land interface as an expression of the resource periphery (such as in terms of tenure or distance from the forest), a useful working definition is that the interface is taken to include that part of Thailand

where proximity of forest has a significant bearing on the tenure, use and governance of non-forest land.

Sato (2000) writes about 'ambiguous lands' which are lands 'legally owned by the state but ... used and cultivated by local people' (p. 156). This type of situation is a major factor at the agriculture/forest land interface. According to Sato, 'ambiguous lands' are 'attractive to a variety of actors, including villagers searching for unoccupied arable lands in the frontiers, government departments on the look-out for new project sites, and conservation agencies sensitive to new areas in need of protection' (p. 156). Various stresses become evident in such situations.

The stresses existing at the agriculture/forest land interface need to be understood in historical context. As Delang (2002) points out, following the Second World War the government of Thailand promoted policies that led to 'highland colonization'. As described by Delang, the process involved cash crop farming, usually by lowland farmers moving into the highlands, promotion of logging through the issuing of 30-year leases, and construction of roads to promote settlement as a means of combating communist insurgents hiding in the forests. In the early 1980s the military regarded the insurgents as having been defeated. In the light of the extensive deforestation which had occurred, strong environmentalist protests, and an incident in which a landslide, claimed to be a result of deforestation, killed 251 people, the government invoked a logging ban in 1989 'and declared the closure of the frontier' (p. 491). Notably, national consumption of wood increased, with the difference coming from imports from neighbouring countries – extending the resource periphery on a regional scale.

Poverty at the resource periphery has been the result of social processes and resource degradation produced as part and parcel of the agrarian transition, rather than a direct result of physical peripherality. For example, one consequence of the highland colonisation (which Phongpaichit and Baker, 2002, refer to as 'peasant colonisation') was that new agricultural land was largely taken up by migrant lowlanders, leaving much of the existing population of mainly ethnic minority peoples living in dwindling forest areas. Among majority populations, an effect of the closing of the frontier was the creation of a pool of 'landless peasants employable by industry' (Delang, 2002, 491).

Forest change and its causal link with poverty

The extent of deforestation during the period of expansion of the frontier was extensive and has been widely discussed and documented. It is important to put the discussion of the extent of forest decline into context and to note that figures on forest areas are notoriously unreliable and inconsistent. They are plagued by problems of definition of what constitutes a forest in the first place, as well as by technical difficulties in carrying out accurate measurement (Tucker *et al.*, 2001). Definition is often based on a certain minimum percentage of crown cover, and the amount of land classified as forest will decrease or increase according to the percentage used. In any case, accurate assessment of percentage crown cover from aerial photographs or satellites is a difficult process, requiring high resolution images.

In addition to the methodological issues, there is the tendency of forest agencies and other interested parties to inflate or deflate estimates for strategic political reasons. In Thailand, Royal Forest Department (RFD) surveys often reflect the legal status of land rather than tree cover. Noting this caveat, it is nevertheless clear that Thailand has suffered severe deforestation at least since the second world war.

According to Suraswadi *et al.* (2005), forest declined as a percentage of land area in Northern Thailand from 69% in 1960 to 43% in 1998. This compares with a decline nationally in the same period from 54% to 25%. Significantly, farm land increased in the same period from 11% to 27% in Northern Thailand and 20% to 41% nationally. These figures suggest that conversion to farm land was a major component of forest loss.

Other sources give somewhat differing estimates of forest area and loss. It is, however, not possible or necessary in this paper to review all the various estimates or to analyse the reasons for the inconsistencies. Whatever the differences in estimates, the various reports consistently suggest that forest areas in Thailand as a whole declined by 50% or more from about 1960 to 2000.

Seeking reasons for forest loss in Thailand's politicised environment is often a matter of apportioning blame. Consequently, there is little consensus over what or who caused the decline in the forest estate. Furthermore, deforestation has been a complex process attributable to both proximate and underlying or remote causes. This

all makes it difficult and perhaps meaningless to quantify responsibility for change in a 'factorised' sense. Deforestation was largely due to development processes including road development, agricultural diversification and expansion into dry-foot upland crops, and both legal and illegal logging of forests. In the public arena, blame has been disproportionately laid on shifting cultivation by 'hill tribes', fires set by poor farmers, and landless fuel collectors or charcoal makers. Attempts to understand change in the forest estate more systematically have ranged from econometric approaches and factor analysis (Panayotou and Sungsuwan, 1989), to detailed social science studies of agricultural land clearance (Pinthong, 1991), to regional analysis that has looked at both development and poverty as causes for deforestation (Hirsch, 1987). It is clear from these analyses that there is not a simple causal link between poverty and deforestation, nor between deforestation and poverty. The social and economic causes and effects of deforestation are complex, contingent and dynamic.

Shifting cultivation (swidden agriculture) is often blamed for having a major role in deforestation. The negative image is particularly evident in public discourse by environmentalists and forestry officials. This is not the place to enter the international debate about the sustainability or otherwise of shifting cultivation, although it is clear that the blame placed on it has been exaggerated in comparison to processes discussed above (Schmidt-Vogt, 1998; Ganjanapan, 1998). Nevertheless, the extent to which shifting agriculture has been blamed demonstrates the way that the politics of blame has been conveniently linked with ethnicity – most shifting cultivators being members of ethnic minorities. Associated with this is an essentialist approach to agricultural practices among ethnic minorities that takes little account of change and context (Hirsch, 1997).

A slightly different explanation of the relationship between highland farmers and deforestation is the idea that poverty causes deforestation. There is a slight shift in emphasis between the discourse which links deforestation with the actions of ethnic minorities and the idea that poverty causes deforestation. In the first case the cause is assumed to be ignorant or irresponsible behaviour, or both. In the second, this behaviour is seen as being the result of poor people having no alternatives to their over-exploitation of natural resources. Both these views ignore the evidence that much, if not

most, deforestation has been associated with State-sponsored development (Hirsch 1987).

We have argued that the causes of deforestation are complex and dynamic. The outcomes of deforestation in terms of poverty are also complex and we will return to some of the issues related to this later. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify several broad types of outcomes, such as decreased sustainability of livelihoods as the quantity and diversity of available forest products and resource security decline. Given that people with relatively high dependency on forests are likely to be relatively poor in the first place, the impact of these factors is increased poverty and economic marginality, particularly affecting already poor people. Loss of income and subsistence from forest resources, especially for people without agricultural land, frequently leads to increased indebtedness. It is important to note that these are the outcomes of reduced availability of resources which is a product of both the quantity of resources that exist and the capacity and right to access these resources.

The politics of marginalisation and conservation at the interface

There are several key stress points at the agriculture-forest interface. One of the most crucial is the stress between upland ethnic minorities involved in shifting cultivation, and the continuing pressure to limit or eradicate this practice. Much debate has occurred about whether shifting cultivation should be absolutely prohibited in reserved forests and protected areas. In fact, the RFD (now subsumed in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment) has often been forced to tolerate shifting cultivation, but this tolerance has frequently been grudging and has not prevented continuing harassment by officials.

One of the consequences of the 1989 logging ban was a shift in emphasis within the RFD towards conservation rather than management of the logging industry. A major result of this was the declaration of large numbers of protected areas in places where forests continued to exist. Most of these were declared in the 1980s and 1990s. By July 2001, there were 81 territorial national parks and 21 marine national parks in Thailand, representing 18% of the total land area (ICEM, 2003). Almost invariably, the new protected areas had resident populations often involved in shifting cultivation agriculture and other economic activities, and these people very quickly found themselves at the centre of a new conservationist politics. Buerger (2003) refers to

a 'coercing conservationism which focuses increasingly on the so-called "hill tribe" ethnic minority groups' (p. 375). The politics of conservation led to odd alliances, such as a convergence of interest between mainly middle class urban conservationists and the RFD.

Some people were forcibly relocated from the new protected areas. Those who remained had no formal rights to resources on what was legally State land. This was often complicated by the absence of citizenship rights because many officials were reluctant to recognise or process claims for members of ethnic minority groups.

To a large extent this conservationism was linked with the politics of ethnicity, although it does sometimes transcend ethnicity. Wong (2005) argues that debate about protected areas and local peoples in Thailand tends to be phrased in terms of issues typical of Northern Thailand, with the rights of hill tribes to remain in and use the resources from protected areas being the main theme. In a case study of Khao Yai National Park in Central Thailand, he shows that ethnic Thai people have also to interact with Protected Areas from which they have been relocated in the past and to the resources of which they have restricted access.

The conflict over people living in protected areas involved urban-upland tensions, with urban people concerned about the quality of their water supply, which they saw as being under threat from hill farming, as well as with concerns about biodiversity, also allegedly under threat. The conflict also involved lowland-upland tensions as lowland farmers claimed that their supplies of water for irrigation were under threat. Both these conflicts are heightened by the ethnic minority status of the upland-living people in or near protected watersheds and upper watercourses.

The response from some hill tribes was to form alliances with a number of non-government organisations concerned with rural livelihoods, and also with academics from a number of universities such as Chiang Mai University. Upland farmers also formed alliances, such as the Northern Farmers' Network, which became increasingly politically active.

A major part of the battleground between the 'dark green' (exclusivist) conservationists and the upland farmers and their 'light green' supporters was the extended battle over the Community Forestry Bill. In 1992 a Community Forestry Bill was proposed by the RFD primarily

to regulate participation in afforestation programs (Makarabhirom, 2000). This was followed in 1993 by an 'alternative' Bill, prepared by members of civil society and academics, to allow people living in forest areas, including protected areas, to gain the right to use and manage the forests in which they lived. For more than a decade and a half, debate over the Bill has continued, with alternative versions being prepared, more or less taking turns in being more or less liberal in terms of community rights. A major stalling point was the question as to whether and how much communities with established connection to Protected Areas would be able to practise community forestry in them.

Contextualising forest dependency in livelihood diversity and change

What emerges from this discussion is the idea that the poverty of forest dwelling people at the agriculture/forest interface in Thailand is largely a product of processes of restricted access to resources through State regulation for supposedly conservation purposes, and their marginalisation through the politics of ethnicity and exclusion. All this is largely framed in terms of environmental politics and discourse. Is this picture too simple?

There is an increasing body of international literature on the links between resources, conservation and poverty, much of it focusing on forests. In this literature there are frequent assertions about causal connections between poverty and environmental conditions. Fisher *et al.* (2005) point out that 'contradictory assertions are all made frequently and often backed up with good evidence (at least for a particular case)' (p. 11). Two examples are the assertion that '[p]overty leads to increased environmental degradation' and the opposing assertion that '[p]eople who are dependent on resources for their livelihoods are likely to protect them more carefully' (p. 11). Fisher *et al.* argue that in any attempt to understand causal connections, it is necessary to identify and understand the 'specific factors that govern causes and effects' (p. 11), in other words the context.

One way of understanding poverty is as absolute poverty, measured against a specified income level such as a 'poverty line' of one dollar per day. Other definitions are more multi-dimensional, such as the World Bank's definition (2001) which takes into account such qualitative factors as lack of assets, powerlessness and vulnerability. The development of this

concept of poverty was influenced by Sen's (1999) view that poverty is 'the deprivation of basic capabilities' which are 'the substantive freedoms [an individual] enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (p. 87). This type of definition means that poverty is both about the absence of income and the absence of the capability to achieve secure livelihoods and make income.

In this approach, forest-dependent people are poor, not just in terms of limited income and resources, but in terms of their limited capability to secure livelihoods, including the rights to use resources and the right to make decisions about livelihoods and lifestyles.

In opposition to the discourse which blames people living at the agriculture/forest interface in Thailand for deforestation, there is an alternative discourse which links poverty with a lack of access to forest, because of actual lack of resources, physical exclusion from forest areas, or lack of rights to use forest products. In Thailand some people have been physically removed from forests, whereas others have restricted access to resources. In terms of the multi-dimensional definition of poverty, the effect of the protectionist policies in forests and the limited alternatives available to upland farmers without access to agricultural land in the lowlands, is increased impoverishment for many upland farmers on the resource periphery.

There is, not surprisingly, another counter-discourse. How valid is the idea of forest dependency anyhow? And, if forest dependency is misunderstood, what sense does it make to state that forest-dependent people are impoverished by restricted access to forests? Byron and Arnold (1997) have questioned the validity, or, at least, the broad applicability, of the concept of forest dependency. They argue that a distinction must be made between people who have no choice but to depend on forests and those who use forest resources by choice, and they stress the need for forest dwellers to be disaggregated in these terms. Clearly this is an important distinction and, as Byron and Arnold argue, different development options are relevant depending on the particular relationship.

Angelsen and Wunder (2003) refer to the idea of a poverty trap. They point out that there is a positive link between 'rural poverty and NTFP [non timber forest product] dependence' (p. 21), citing a paper by Neumann and Hirsch (2000) which suggests that the poorest people are most dependent on NTFPs. Angelsen and Wunder

then point out that this can be understood in two ways. People may be forest dependent because they are poor and therefore have no other real alternatives, either in the short or long term. In this case the poverty is 'exogenous' and forests can be seen as a 'safety net', to limit the effects of extreme poverty. On the other hand, people may be poor because they are forest dependent, relying on low-value forest products for income. In this case the poverty is 'endogenous' and forests can be a 'poverty trap'.

In many ways this distinction is useful. However, it can also be somewhat circular. Poor people resident in forests in the forest periphery in Thailand often depend on forests because they have no other real alternatives (except as cheap migrant industrial labour). But, just as they are forest dependent because poor, they are also poor because they are forest dependent. They have no choice but to depend on low-value products. The distinction between dependent because poor and poor because dependent makes no real sense unless people can voluntarily choose to be forest dependent. Either way it comes back to the possibility of choice (or empowerment and capability).

One problem with the Angelsen and Wunder distinction is that it largely ignores the institutional 'structures and processes' that can transfer potential assets into real ones with outcomes in terms of livelihoods. (Chambers and Conway (1992) refer to these as 'transforming structures and processes'.) In other words it ignores the possibility that poor forest-dependent people may remain poor because they are unable, for political or institutional reasons (such as tenure), to capture the benefits of valuable forest resources.

This is a point supported by Dove's (1993) argument that forest dwellers remain poor because they only have access to low-value products. The argument is that any forest product that is valuable is expropriated by those with political power and access to political power.

The community forestry movement in Thailand attempts to address the need for rights to live in the forest and to use forest products as a prerequisite for improved livelihoods. In doing so, advocates stress the conservation-friendly practices of the upland ethnic groups, especially the Karen. While this is clearly an important step, some authors claim that it is a limited, not flawed, strategy. Walker (2004) argues that non-government organisations and others advocating community forestry exaggerate forest dependency and the emphasis placed on sustainable

forest management by forest dwellers in the policy debate, misrepresenting the nature of livelihoods by over-emphasising the importance of forests and failing to recognise the importance of agriculture. He refers to this process as 'arborealisation'. He points out that most rural people are concerned more with agriculture than with forests and that the emphasis of the community forestry movement on forests has been, to an extent, counter-productive. Significantly, the Community Forestry Bill (under active consideration at the time he was writing) did not provide for agriculture in Protected Areas, despite the importance of agriculture to livelihoods in such areas. This is an important point and it does seem clear that 'forest dependency', generally (not just in Thailand), has been couched in narrow terms as dependence on forest products (mainly NTFPs) rather than dependency on availability of lands in or adjacent to forests for agriculture. Even the discussions by Byron and Arnold (1997) and Angelsen and Wunder (2001), while critical of the notion of forest dependency, seem to assume that it is necessarily about dependence on NTFPs.

Given the undisputed fact that upland peoples in much of Southeast Asia have been excluded from rights to forest land on the basis that it belongs to the State, the emphasis of community forestry advocates on rights to forests makes some sense, even if it is based on a distorted notion of livelihood systems. Li (2002), referring to community-based natural resource management more broadly in Southeast Asia, refers to 'strategic simplifications' as a means of attracting support for efforts advocating community rights to resources. She argues that attempts to 'anchor legal rights in specific identities or sets of practices' is a 'problematic basis for justice'. On the contrary she argues the need to look for ways to 'secure for uplanders the benefits of a fuller citizenship' (p. 278). In this view, rights are not dependent on demonstrating that traditional practices are sustainable or environment friendly, but rather are based on broader rights of citizens.

Is it possible that, by focusing on the rhetoric of the capacity of upland peoples to conserve forests, by framing them as 'forest people', that is, by trying to operate a counter discourse within the conservationist framework, community forestry is actually creating a potential 'rhetorical trap', perhaps even a 'rhetorical poverty trap', tying people into a commitment to preserve trees and forests, without really addressing issues which

are more central to poverty reduction, such as secure rights to forest land for agriculture? Walker (2004) suggests there may be a need for a 'broader package of advocacy' and that 'upland cash cropping could be portrayed as one important component of the development of Thailand's agricultural sector' (p. 323).

Walker (2004) has argued that too much focus on trees shifts attention away from recognition of the more important issue of agriculture. Rigg (2005) goes further, arguing that agriculture itself is becoming less linked with livelihoods in much of Southeast Asia (including Thailand). Livelihoods are becoming 'pluriactive', with people involved in a diversity of activities including non-farm work. Reduced average farm sizes have not simply resulted in a 'squeeze on livelihoods' but, instead, there has been 'a general rise in household standards of living for rural households ... in the context of a declining land resource' (p. 177). In other words, people have livelihoods, not specifically forest livelihoods or agricultural livelihoods.

These are important points, with considerable relevance to the question of rural poverty. Neither view necessarily implies that forests (in the case of Walker) or agriculture (in the case of Rigg) are unimportant, but rather that their importance to poverty needs to be understood in the context of rapid changes to agriculture and the rural economy. Some of the crucial elements of agricultural change include rapidly changing crop types, diversification of agriculture-based livelihoods, concentration of de facto landholding in agricultural land reform areas, and an increased role for agri-business, including the vertical integration of agriculture and the growth of contract farming. All this is accompanied by rapid migration to cities, often associated with remittances to agricultural families.

Agrarian change at the forest-agriculture interface mediates the connection between forests and poverty in regionally quite specific ways. One example is the changing nature of shifting cultivation in the uplands of northern Thailand. Shifting cultivation is no longer subsistence based, or based on traditional cash crops such as opium. Upland-based ethnic minority cultivators increasingly respond to urban and even international markets for products such as cool climate vegetables and flowers.

Another regionally specific example of agrarian change with implications for poverty and forest condition at the resource periphery is the agriculture/forest fringe in western Thailand.

In relatively recently consolidated frontier areas, we now see the rapid mechanisation of agriculture, concomitant concentration of holdings for cash cropping as people lease out smallholdings for sugar and other broadacre crops, and an increasing reliance on remittances from non-local urban occupations. These areas are adjacent to the Western Forest Complex, where forest is strictly off-limits under the protection of wildlife sanctuary legislation.

The situation described is very much the picture painted by Rigg, but the key issue to highlight here is what such changes mean for the forest-poverty question. We suggest that one of the most important implications is that any framing of forests as either a safety net or a poverty trap misses the point that forests are part of much more diverse livelihood systems.

The agrarian transition needs to be understood as a normal process, part of a continuing process of change, rather than as something abnormal. In this perspective, those involved in 'modern' agricultural practices should not be seen as losing their cultural identity and associated rights. It might make more sense to advocate rights in terms of 'natural rights' or 'human rights', rather than asserting rights to forest based primarily on the continuation of traditional practices. Basing assertions of rights on Walker's 'broader package of advocacy' is a strategy which might help to avoid getting into the type of rhetorical trap we mentioned earlier.

Extending poverty and forest/agriculture issues beyond Thailand's borders

To what extent are these relationships and changing agrarian relations associated with poverty and agriculture-forest interactions specific to Thailand? Clearly much depends on context, but there are also interactions that permeate and transcend borders. It is instructive to extend the analysis briefly to Thailand's regional neighbours. There are three main ways in which the resource periphery in the wider Mekong region can be considered.

First, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Myanmar have increasingly taken on a role as Thailand's resource periphery, in the area of forestry as well as other resource sectors. Following the 1989 logging ban, Thailand moved quickly to source timber from neighbouring countries. Coinciding with the regional détente under the banner 'from battlefields to marketplace', Thai investors re-established forestry operations in Laos that had been nationalised after 1975, did

deals with the Burmese military and established connections with the Khmer Rouge – all associated with significant expansion of logging under mainly poorly regulated conditions and with significant resultant deforestation. More recently, the expansion of plantations, in Laos in particular, has extended this peripheral role in the regional resource economy. It is notable that eco-political constraints on logging and fast-growing tree plantations in Thailand have been as much a part of the shift across borders as has the scarcity of forest resources within Thailand.

Second, there are cognate issues in neighbouring countries as they have moved toward outward-orientated marketised production. Tenurial regimes in the formerly socialist economies have become more individualised and land has become commodified, albeit to a much lesser degree than in Thailand. Thongmanivong and Fujita (2006) argue that shifts to the market economy in Laos will lead to increased demand for privatisation of land. They also mention demand for leasing of land for rubber plantation. It is a moot point whether this will lead to further disempowerment of poorer farmers.

Similarly, the influence of 'eco-governmentality' (Goldman, 2004) has seen a demarcation of conservation-inspired resource boundaries at various levels. Deepening of market interactions in agriculture has compounded demographic pressures on the periphery as the resource base is incorporated into national and regional commodity economies. A key policy question is the extent to which there is simply a teleological inevitability that the extent and nature of poverty-related issues at the agriculture-forest boundary in neighbouring countries will follow the Thai pattern in ten, twenty or thirty years' time, or whether the social and ecological problems experienced in Thailand can in fact provide helpful lessons.

Third, Thailand's experience has had an influence on the development direction and policy environment of neighbouring countries in such areas as roads, community forests, land titling and decentralisation. Trunk and rural feeder road construction has been rapidly linking parts of the country and accessing previously remote rural areas in Laos in ways similar to the experience of northeastern Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s – physical linkage is seen as a *sine qua non* for development. Programs that entrenched property rights in Thailand, notably the World Bank and Australian government-

funded land titling program, have now been extended to Laos, and a somewhat similar program is being carried out in Cambodia. Decentralisation of resource and land management has also taken hold as a key governance reform in these countries. Further, community forestry has been incorporated into the policy process, although the meaning of community forestry varies markedly from one context to another (Hirsch, 1998).

In reference to the changes in Laos, especially in terms of increased commercialisation of agricultural production, Thongmanivong and Fujita (2006) argue that land allocations under the Land and Forest Allocation Policy will need to be renegotiated if the Participatory Land Allocation process is to 'meet the actual needs of the local communities' (p. 244). This is an important point, which has wider resonance. As in Thailand, the Lao policy seems to have been framed in terms of an emphasis on subsistence livelihoods. The approach was intended as a means to plan land use, at a community level, in a way that is holistic (allowing for a variety of land uses in forest lands surrounding a village) and equitable. The problem is that the context within which land is used has changed, even before the national program of Participatory Land Allocation has been completed. The solution to this is renegotiation and, we suggest, to build in a process of negotiation into all land use decisions rather than to try to apply 'one size fits all' solutions.

Conclusions and implications for policy

In this paper we have tried to show, based on a discussion of literature primarily on Thailand, that the connections between agriculture and forest land and between forests and poverty are far more complex than the dominant competing discourses might suggest. The simplification of these complexities has led to policies and policy advocacy that are, at best, unhelpful.

As a result of discourses that frame forest issues in terms of threats to biodiversity due to misuse by 'forest-dependent people', forest policies have been dominated by an approach based on the need to prevent exploitative use of forests, especially by excluding people from forest areas. This has clearly had negative effects on peoples' livelihoods and has contributed to their impoverishment in terms of limiting their capabilities, especially by restricting their rights to resources and livelihoods.

On the other hand, advocates of the interests of 'forest-dependent' communities have accepted the environmentalist framing of the issue and responded by stressing the environmental credentials of forest peoples. This has involved downplaying the value of important economic activities such as agriculture and perhaps over-emphasising subsistence livelihoods. While this may have been a 'strategic simplification' in Li's terms, it seems to have limited the options for broader claims related to rights and citizenship. As we have suggested, it may be a 'rhetorical trap', potentially achieving short term goals at the risk of entrenching limitations on livelihood options.

We would suggest that the policy implications are not recommendations about the best policy options, but rather point toward the need for a dynamic and flexible policy process that accommodates complexity, uncertainty and change. Walker's challenge to the overemphasis on forests in the community forestry movement does not imply that advocacy of rights to forest land and resources is unnecessary, but rather that advocacy should embrace a broader range of activities. Rigg's argument that livelihoods and poverty are being de-linked from agriculture (and, by extension, forests) does not imply that attempts to improve agricultural production and forest access are no longer necessary. Instead it implies that other strategies should also be considered. It is clear that the interactions are dynamic and solutions will not be permanent.

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