

Summary of Discussion following Plenary 2

(1) Khin Ohmar: “Conflicts and Migration”

Open discussion

Below is a summary of the questions, answers, and open discussion following Khin Ohmar’s presentation on “Conflicts and Migration.”

***Forced labour in Burma; the UN refugee convention:** A participant from Thailand made a comment about ongoing human rights abuses in Shan State, Burma, specifically in regard to forced labour. She explained how villagers are forced to plant certain cash crops by the military regime. Another participant from Thailand commented on the ongoing problems resulting from widespread lack of recognition of the refugee convention. She added that the problem extends beyond simply adhering to international standards, but that such standards are not fully adequate to address the changing situation.*

***Impact of Burma’s elections on migrants:** Another participant from Thailand noted she had heard that migrants would be able to vote at embassies for Burma’s elections in November 2010, while they would still have to travel to the border for any other procedures. Phil Robertson from Human Rights Watch commented about the mixed flows of migrants and refugees from Burma, saying that people who could be screened as refugees are working as migrants. Noting the ongoing discussion in Thai circles about repatriation of refugees after the election, he asked whether there were any strategies in place for this possibility.*

Khin Ohmar responded by expressing her concern for the risk for migrants and refugees to be forcibly returned to Burma after the elections. While noting the uncertainties, she asked the participants to take a prominent role in raising their voices to protect people from Burma after the elections. While repatriation has always been a concern, it is being discussed more concretely now, she added. Khin Ohmar also discussed the elections in Burma more broadly. She raised concerns about how the Burma army will secure the vote, potentially including forced proxy voting for migrants who have left the country. The junta proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), is forcing people to join its organization, and claims millions of members across the country, she said. She added, “We won’t tell people what to do... We have a clear position to boycott the elections... [but] people from local communities have to decide for themselves.”

(2) Sai Sai: “Major Dams in Burma” – overview of the situation

Open discussion

Below is a summary of the questions, answers, and open discussion following Sai Sai’s presentation on “Major Dams in Burma.”

Regional power grid and ADB involvement; conflict on the Thai-Burma border; A participant from Thailand asked about the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) power grid, and whether it has been affected by regional agreements. He also asked for commentary on the conflict and displacement on the Thai-Burma border in June 2009.

Sai Sai responded by discussing the Asian Development Bank (ADB)'s GMS program, which the Tasang project was a part of around 2000-2001. He said that many projects of this program have been implemented except for the regional power grid, since it is linked with sensitive issues in Burma. Sai Sai recalled that whenever they raise the issue and process with the ADB, they claim that they do not support it anymore. "If we look into it, the ADB still supports the GMS [projects]. Each year, the Energy ministries get together; last year they held a meeting in Bagan, Burma, as part of the preparation for a regional power grid."

In response to the question about the cross-border conflict and displacement, Sai Sai said that the fighting between the regime-supported Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Karen National Union (KNU) is clearly linked to the dam project and economic zone. "If we look at the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), if we look at the map, it clearly shows that the fighting is close to the dam site..."

Impacts of dam projects; natural disasters: A participant from Thailand asked for predictions of potential impacts of dam projects in Burma and Thailand, including any possible natural disasters.

Sai Sai answered by discussing the Hatgyi dam example, saying that while the dam is in Karen state, Burma, the impact will reach the Thai border. He described the research efforts of the Thai community impacted by the Salween river, on the biodiversity of the river and how culture and ecology are linked in that environment. "They are collecting information, using the villager database, doing a campaign with the Thai government and with EGAT. They are using local knowledge to protect livelihoods." He talked about a visit of the river network from Mekong's visit to the Salween river. From that visit, they could see that, since the dam has been built on the Mekong, local lives have been impacted, "They could see that the Mekong has no water, no fish, but the Salween still does."

Khin Ohmar added that since 2008's Cyclone Nargis, there have been other natural disasters, such as flooding and droughts, though on a lesser scale. She discussed the assessment of environmentalists in Burma, which predicts that in the coming 50 years, Burma's temperature will rise by 4 centigrade; they also anticipate more flooding. She also called attention to the Burma Partnership website (www.burmapartnership.org), on which they will post upcoming plans and actions in which solidarity organizations can participate.

(3) Chanida Bamford: "Globalisation/economic integration and migration"

Below is a summary of the questions, answers, and open discussion Chanida Bamford's presentation on "Globalisation/ economic integration and migration."

Deglobalization and migration: *Two participants from Thailand asked the speaker about the philosophy of deglobalization, and questioned its perspective on migration. One asked whether the speaker intended to say that people should not be migrating. Another participant questioned whether economic policies should be prioritized over migrant worker issues, and asked how to tie local empowerment with larger economic issues.*

Ms. Chanida Bamford responded by saying that people pushed towards migrating for economic reasons is "unnatural," and therefore the way the economy is organized must be different. She emphasized the importance of community participation in food security and food sovereignty, and asked "How do we produce food without depleting natural resources? Should we redistribute land so people can work on the land?" She discussed the example of Burma, a country rich with natural resources, but a migrant sending country. She suggested that if land reform happens and communities can control their own resources, economic growth and development, that people will have no need to migrant. She also pointed to the example of communities in Thailand who are working towards localization instead of globalization, and referred to the sufficiency economy theory of the King of Thailand. By producing for their own community, instead of manufacturing, these communities were not affected by the economic crisis. She reiterated the ideal vision of deglobalization, of bringing price control closer to the community, in order to decide what to produce and who to sell to as well as control decent wages. She said, "Some people say this is utopia, but if we don't have a vision, we are doomed."

Addressing the gap between banks and people; neoliberal capitalism vs. globalization: *Phil Robertson from Human Rights Watch raised a question about Thailand's once again considering loans from the ADB and the World Bank. He pointed to the big gap between banks and local communities, particularly since the 1997 crisis. "As the ADB and GMS will drive transport and communications connections, going against localization, what are Focus on the Global South and others doing to, practically speaking, to address the gap between the ADB plans and support for dams, and peoples' lives?" A participant from Thailand pointed out the need to distinguish between globalization and neoliberal capitalism, noting that people get some benefits from globalization, including new media, recognition of rights and democracy. He asked how it is possible to connect local people to concepts such as deglobalization and neoliberalism. He also asked about the speaker's perspective on the argument against neoliberalism that claims that the state has a responsibility not only to enforce the contract but also to provide individual welfare; he suggested that this is another way to approach the issue that involves movements and trade unions.*

In response to Phil Robertson's question, Chanida said that Focus is connected to the NGO Forum on the ADB, monitoring and lobbying, talking to shareholders at the ADB, and trying to inform their policies. She went on to say that, "People may not have to know what the ADB is about, but if they know what projects will take place in their communities, and know the impacts, they will start questioning the projects themselves. This happens in Thailand, when communities fight investment. We have been fighting dams, because everybody knows the impact. People in Rayong province did not know much about the factories, but now they do. They are fighting to limit the industrialization of the area."

She went on to discuss the importance of sharing information in affected communities: "If people know, they will definitely fight. They will pressure the government to do a proper EIA, SIA. Now in Thailand a big thing is Health Impact Assessments. This will delay the projects, but in the end it depends on how strong and what allies they can get from bureaucrats, governments, and elites. Information should be shared about the impact and the examples of struggles that are happening areas, not only in Thailand and Asia but Latin America and Africa. Our job as NGOs working on globalization is [that] we have to get information out." She also raised the importance of people understanding how free market capitalism works, not only at the conceptual level, but how they are living it. "You have to explain to them how they are connected to the markets, where money comes from, why are we in debt? How capitalism works is a prerequisite for people. We have to get the picture before we dream of something different."