

Alternative Land Management in Thailand:

A STUDY OF THE SOUTHERN PEASANTS'
FEDERATION OF THAILAND (SPFT)



ALTERNATIVE LAND MANAGEMENT IN THAILAND:

A Case Study of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand

This study initially aimed to understand alternative land management and how local people use land in a productive way. My thanks go to the Southern Peasant's Federation of Thailand (SPFT) that made this study possible. Specially, I would like to thank all SPFT members who shared your experiences with me and allowed me to inscribe their stories on this study. I would like to dedicate this study to all land rights defenders who struggle to protect their lands and livelihoods. In solidarity!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
LAND GOVERNANCE IN THAILAND	6
CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY RIGHTS TO LAND	12
METHODOLOGY	14
CASE STUDY OF THE SOUTHERN PEASANTS' FEDERATION OF THAILAND	15
Land Ownership and Control in the South of Thailand	15
Becoming the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT)	17
Profiles of the SPFT Communities	19
Threats and Violations	19
Community Land Title as Alternative Practice of Land Governance and Management	21
Community Economic Practices	25
Grassroots Democracy	26
Networking Strategies	28
Community Constitutions	29
Building Community Cultures	29
Women Empowerment	31
CONCLUSION	32
REFERENCES	33

ACRONYMS

ACSPFT	Agricultural Cooperative of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand
ALRO	Agricultural Land Reform Office
CLT	Community Land Title
CLTO	Community Land Title Office
CODI	Community Organisations Development Institute
DOL	Department of Land
FFT	Farmers' Federation of Thailand
LABAI	Land Bank Administration Institute
MOAC	Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
MOI	Ministry of Interior
MNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MSDHS	Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra
NHRCT	National Human Rights Commission of Thailand
P-Move	People's Movement for a Just Society
RFD	Royal Forest Department
SPFT	Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand
SPPN	Southern Poor People Network

INTRODUCTION

*Fight for land
Fight for right
Fight for liberty
Fight for equality
Fight for justice
Revolution for democracy*

(Motto on the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand t-shirt)

Land contestations in Thailand are a consequence of the government's centralization of ownership and management of public lands by legislation and by force. In addition, state centralization of lands is motivated by its economic development model following neo-liberal capitalism in which land is a commodity serving the market economy. Consequently, inequitable land distribution has endured in Thailand. In the South of Thailand, facilitated by government policies and practices, land holdings for commercial crops, especially oil palm, are concentrated under the control of private companies. As a result, landless and small-scale peasants have been excluded from land as a means of production.

Based on qualitative methods, this study aims to examine the struggle for land of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) in Surat Thani Province, Thailand. The study starts by showing how land governance in Thailand results in inequitable

land distribution, land concentration and eventually land conflicts. It discusses further the concept of community rights as an alternative reinforcing the land rights movement in Thailand, including the SPFT. Next, the study depicts the background of the struggle for land in the South of Thailand and how SPFT was established. Last, the study examines SPFT's struggle for land through alternative practices of land governance and management, community economic practices, grassroots democracy, networking strategies, community constitutions, building community cultures and women empowerment. The SPFT uses these strategies to counter centralized land management and the sway of capitalism in Thailand.

It finds that landless and small-scale peasants in the SPFT communities see land as a fundamental right of peasants. They use land as a means of production for subsistence livelihoods while the right to agricultural land is a safety net and social capital of local communities. The SPFT have applied the concept of community land title (CLT), underpinned by the concept of community rights to land and natural resource management, to counter state-centric land management. SPFT's practices become empower people to manage their resources, and eventually initiate participatory development and the exercise of democracy.

LAND GOVERNANCE IN THAILAND

Historically, the Thai state¹ has control over ownership and management of land in Thailand. In other words, the state owns all lands and dominates land titles. Under the quasi-feudal relations during the era of Siam absolute monarchy, monarchs, local lords and nobles appropriated taxes (cash, in-kind and corvée labor) from slaves and subjects.² Even though the social status of people was determined by the size of land owned, the control of labor shaped the distribution of power in society. The concept of land ownership was limited to cultivation right through tax payment. The concept of land title was developed between the late 19th and the beginning of 20th century, after titles were first obtained by individuals in 1882 (B.E. 2425). Later, the modern system of cadastral surveys systematically established the centralized land registration through the

Department of Land in 1901 (B.E. 2444), as part of the consolidation of power to the central administration.³ Even though the Thai state has repeatedly attempted land reform, land has not been distributed to people equitably. The first attempt at land reform in Thailand was by the People's Party in 1933 (B.E. 2576) after the Siamese Revolution, unifying land and redistributing it equally. However, this reform was resisted by the elite who had amassed land.⁴ In 1954 (B.E. 2497), the Thai state proclaimed a Land Code which has since mandated the government to issue land titles and utilization. In particular, it set a maximum land holding of 50 rai (approximately 8 hectares) to prevent land accumulation and speculation. The Code also encouraged people to use land productively, and stipulated that land left barren for a number of years be returned to the state. However, the ceiling on

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- 1 Formerly, Thailand was named as Siam during the era of the absolute monarchy. In 1932, the People's Party revolutionized the country from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. The name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand in 1939. In this article, Thai state refers generally to the central government that rules Thailand, over time.
 - 2 Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso. "Territorialization and state power in Thailand." *Theory and Society* 24, no. 3 (1995): 385-426.
 - 3 Derek Hall, Philip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li. *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).
 - 4 Veerawat Ariyaviriyant. "Development of Land Reform in Thailand: A Case Study on the Passing of Land Reform Law (BE 2475 – BE 2518)." (in Thai) (Master Thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 2009).

land holdings was revoked by the National Executive Council Announcement No. 49 in 1959 (B.E. 2502), claiming that the limitation hindered national economic prosperity.⁵ In other words, a limitation on land ownership violates the principles of neoliberal capitalism.

Section 4 of the Forest Act 1941 (B.E. 2484) defines forest as “land which is not acquired by any persons under the Land Code”. In other words, the Thai state owns all land which has not been identified as belonging to any individual with formal documents. However, Section 16 of the National Reserved Forests Act 1964 (B.E. 2507) opens opportunities for the private sector to use degraded forest areas on concessions of up to 30 years. In 1966 (B.E. 2509), the Thai state also granted logging concessions which led to massive deforestation. Forest areas decreased by 52 percent between 1961 (B.E. 2504) and 1989 (B.E. 2532) when concessions were eventually banned⁶. In addition, the Thai state has responded the global market demand for particular industrial crops, like cassava, rubber, oil palm, shrimp and fast-growing trees such as eucalyptus by facilitating private sector use of state-owned land, especially degraded forest, which has been transformed into mono-cropped plantations serving the export-oriented agricultural crops. This has increased land prices and generated large-scale land acquisitions.⁷

After the popular uprising in 1973 (B.E. 2516), farmers’ mobilizations between 1973 and 1976 (B.E. 2516 and 2519) successfully propelled the government to issue the Agricultural Land Reform Act in 1975 (B.E. 2518) and establish the Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO). The role of ALRO is to redistribute unused land expropriated or purchased from private landowners or state land to households with no or insufficient land for agricultural purposes. Such reallocated land cannot be sold or leased to others. The Act also specified holdings of not more than 50 rai (8 hectares).⁸ It can be argued that ALRO has been ineffective in expropriating land from private landowners, but has bought land from those willing to sell. Most ALRO land has been allocated from state-owned land, especially degraded forest.⁹ ALRO land is under individual land titles, and many studies have discovered that land titles have been corruptly sold by entitled recipients to land speculators and investors for land accumulation despite the fact that such sales are illegal.¹⁰

The state has monopolized the land titling process by politically and socio-economically determining different types of land holding (see *Table 1 for land titles and uses in Thailand*). The most prominent land titling program in Thailand was launched by the World Bank with USD 183.1 million

5 *ibid*

6 “*Logging concessions: Lessons learned in blood*” (in Thai). Retrieved from Seub Nakhasathien Foundation website on <https://bit.ly/2PJ8Wsh>, on 22 October 2018.

7 Derek Hall, “Land Grabs, Land Control, and Southeast Asian Crop Booms,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (October 2011).

8 Jason Lubanski. *Land is life: a policy advocacy case study of the Northern Thailand land reform movement*. Vermont, USA: SIT Graduate Institute, Brattleboro, 2012. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3588&context=capstones>; Lamb, V., et al. *Access to productive agricultural land by the landless, land poor and smallholder farmers in the four Lower Mekong River Basin countries*. Oxfam, Phnom Penh (2015); Prapimhan Chiengkul. *Hegemony and counter-hegemony in the agri-food system in Thailand (1990-2014)*. (PhD dissertation, University of Warwick, 2015).

9 Land Reform Network and Local Act. *A Report on the Study “Land Reform Process and Sustainable Land Management by People”*. Nonthaburi, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.landactionthai.org>. (in Thai)

10 Walden Bello, Shea Cunningham, and Li Kheng Pho, *A Siamese Tragedy: Development and Disintegration in Modern Thailand* (New York: Zed Books, 1998)

in loans from 1984 to 2004 (B.E. 2527 to 2547). The project aimed to improve land administration by using cadastral surveying and mapping technology to issue land titles. It also intended to create tenure security as a means to reduce poverty, increase the capacity of individuals, especially agrarians, to access finance by using land as collateral, and increase land productivity through the efficiency of a free market.¹¹ By the completion of the project, approximately 13 million titles had been issued to landowners in Thailand.¹² Arguably, there have been three critical hallmarks of land governance in Thailand. First, the Thai state simplified equivocal and unorganized parcels into formal categories of land which the state can properly control and utilize through taxation. In other words, land and landowners were governed under invented statecraft binding to the nation-state system.¹³ Second, the titling programme can be seen as market-led land governance¹⁴ where a land title deed fully entitles the landowner to sell land or use it as collateral in a free market in compliance with neoliberal capitalism.¹⁵ Third, the programme instituted a land tenure system which recognizes only state or individual ownership, disregarding customary and communal land tenure at the community level, particularly in the case of communities living in the forest.¹⁶

To address illegal trespassing in reserved forest land, the RFD launched the agriculture usage certificate program, also known as STK, in 1982. The STK certificates were issued to more than 700,000 households during 1982-1993¹⁷ which allowed each recipient to farm in forestland, especially degraded forest. The document granted 5-year cultivation rights but the right was merely inherited and non-saleable. It is arguable that the Thai state used a classification system to determine and demarcate forest land into reserved and economic forests.¹⁸ The government continued to prevent people from farming in forestland despite issuing a number of policies to divert forest land use for economic interests. For example, the Land Distribution Program for the Poor Living in Degraded National Forest, also known as *Khor Jor Kor*, was implemented during 1990-1992 to reclaim forest land, and allocate newly cultivated land for people who were living and farming in reserved forest areas. Nonetheless, the program evicted up to 1 million families, especially in Northeast Thailand¹⁹ who had resided and farmed in denuded forestlands for a decade while the program transformed most of the areas into eucalyptus plantations that would supply pulp and paper industries.²⁰ The program totally failed because people were forcibly evicted by military and RFD officials and resettled to

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- 11 Rebeca Leonard and Kingkorn Narintarakul. "Thailand's land titling program: Securing land for the poor." Paper presented at *Politics of the Commons* International Conference, Regional Centre for Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, July 11-14 2003. Retrieved from https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/1951/Rebeca_Leonard.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
 - 12 Chakriya Bowman. "Thailand Land Titling Project". Paper presented at the Conference on *Scaling up Poverty Reduction*, Shanghai (May, 2004).
 - 13 James C. Scott. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press, 1998; Leonard and Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, 2003.
 - 14 PrapimhanChiengkul, 2015.
 - 15 Leonard and Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, 2003; Thai Land Reform Network and Local Act, 2010; Hall et. al., 2011.
 - 16 Leonard and Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, 2003.
 - 17 Larry Lohmann. "Land, power and forest colonization in Thailand." *Global Ecology and Biogeography Letters* (1993): 180-191.
 - 18 Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Lee Peluso, 1995.
 - 19 Hall et. al., 2011.
 - 20 Puangthong Pawakapan. Thai Junta Militarizes the Management of Natural Resources. In *Perspective*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015.

TABLE 1
TYPES OF LAND TITLES AND USES IN THAILAND

LAND TITLE	DESCRIPTION	LEGISLATION/AGENCY	NOTE
Sor Kor 1 (SK1)/ Sor Kor 2 (SK2)	Land claim certificate	1954 Land Code/ Department of Land (DOL)	Right to farm in the forest; needs proof of pre-1954 land use
Nor Sor 2 (NS2)	Pre-emptive rights certificate	1954 Land Code/ Department of Land (DOL)	Granted on condition of use, and only transferable by inheritance
Nor Sor 3 (NS3)	Certificate of Utilization	1954 Land Code/ Department of Land (DOL)	Granted on condition of use, usable as collateral and saleable after 30 days public notice
Nor Sor 4 (NS4) (Chanote)	Full land ownership certificate	1954 Land Code/ Department of Land (DOL)	Full title, private ownership; transferable; and saleable
Sor Por Kor (SPK)	Agricultural usage certificate	1975 Agricultural Land Reform Act/Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO)	Distributed to landless/poor agrarians for agricultural use only and non-transferable
Sor Tor Kor (STK)	5-year agricultural usage certificate	1985 National Reserved Forest Act/Royal Forest Department (RFD)	Issued for agricultural use on degraded forest land, limited to 15 rai and non-transferable other than by inheritance
Community Land Title	Land use document for communal land	2010 Regulation of the Prime Minister's Office / Community Land Title Office (CLTO) under the Prime Minister's Office	Issued to a community entity for using and managing state land; non-saleable but can be returned to community entity for further management
Communal Plots (Thii DinPleng Ruam)	Land use document for communal land	2014 Regulation of the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Resolution on 22 December 2015/ the National Land Policy Committee led by the Prime Minister	Issued to government agencies which work with local communities on communal land management; non-saleable and non-transferable other than by inheritance; limited to 20 rai each for 30-year permission.
Community Forestry	Land use document on forest land	Community Forestry Bill passed by the National Legislative Assembly in 2019/Royal Forest Department (RFD)	Allows communities to manage and use natural resources communally in reserved forest (excluding conservation areas), upon registration with the government; non-saleable

Compiled by the author by adapting from Lubanski (2012); Lamb et.al. (2015) and Hayward (2017)

new land. Moreover, resettled households did not receive adequate compensation, and were placed in lands that other households already settled and farmed. The program was ended by protests of affected villagers.²¹

In the late 1980s, the concept of community rights reinforced communal land management. Community forestry and community land titling had been promoted by people, civil society and NGOs. For example, the concept of community forestry based on community-based natural resource management has been used to grant the rights to natural resources in relation to sustainability, equal participation of people, and balance between local people and ecosystem.²²

The community forestry bill was recently passed by the National Legislative Assembly in early 2019 which will become effective as a law soon. Through this bill, the communities are required to register and propose 5-year plans on how to use and conserve the forest land with the RFD.²³ However, even though the bill allows people to use and manage resources in registered forestland, it still disregards customary rights. More importantly, the government led by the RFD centralizes and dominates the uses of resources in the forest. In short, the community forestry bill has misinterpreted the initial proposal by the people movement.²⁴

For the community land title (CLT), also known as Chanot Chum Chon, the government issued the Regulation of the Prime Minister's Office

on the Community Land Title in 2010. In this non-legally binding regulation, the Community Land Title Office (CLTO) is authorized to issue Community Land Titles.²⁵

After the coup in 2014, the military government launched the National Land Policy Committee with of three subcommittees: on land allocation led by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE); on land management led by the Ministry of Interior (MOI); and on vocational promotion and development led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC). This distribution of such role for these ministries is promoted as a holistic approach to address inequitable land distribution. The role of MNRE is to allocate state land to the landless poor. The role of MOI is to set up criteria for the landless poor to be beneficiaries.²⁶ The role of MOAC is to provide vocational training to beneficiaries. The new policy aims to allocate state land, such as reserved forestland, public land and ALRO land, etc., to the landless poor with a 30-year permission for use. The committee has invented the concept of communal plots, also known as *Thii DinPleng Ruam*, which refers to collective land management. Even though the concept is similar to the concept of CTL (see the following section for further discussion), the government retains control over the utilization of land and resources. Specifically, local communities do not have the authority to own and manage their

21 Larry Lohmann, 1993.

22 Tim Forsyth and Thomas Sikor. "Forests, development and the globalisation of justice." *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013).

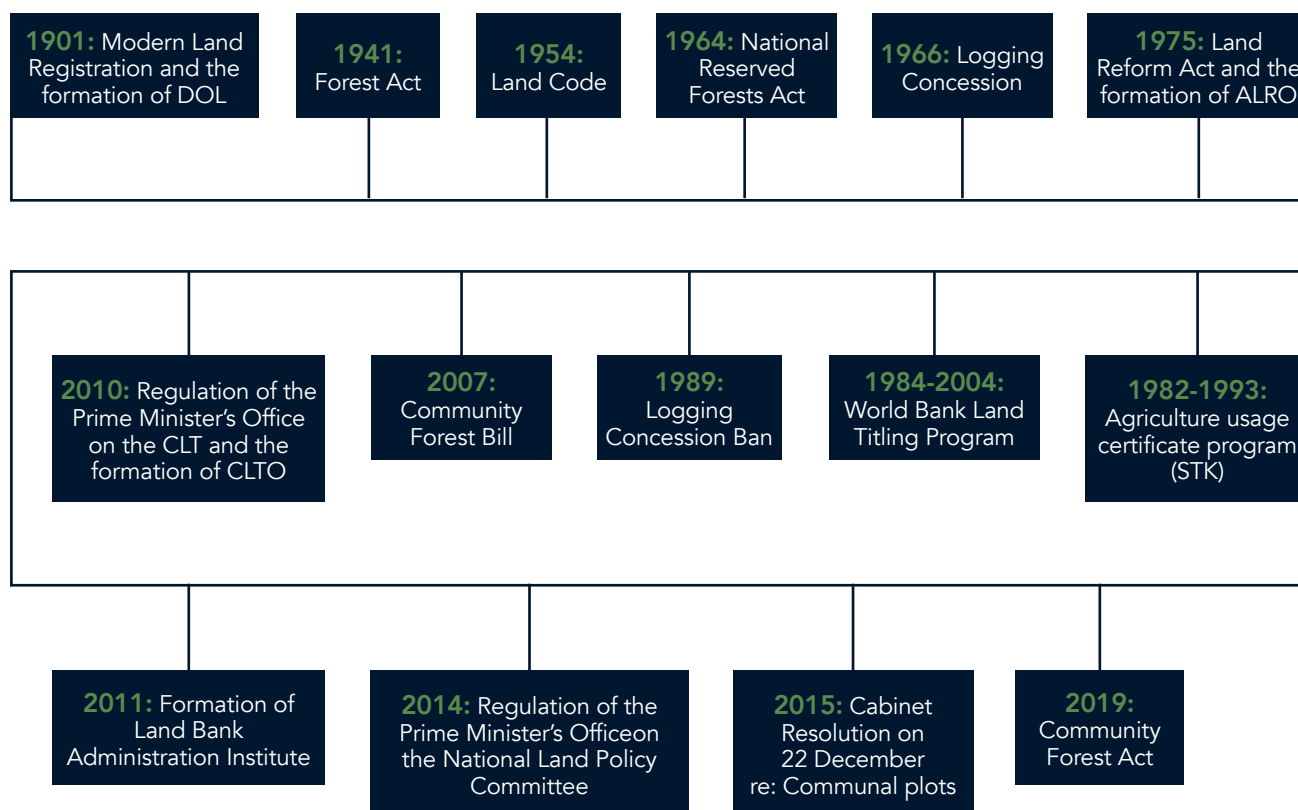
23 "Community Forest Bill passes NLA, February 18, 2019," *Bangkok Post*. Accessed February 21, 2019. Available from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1630566/community-forest-bill-passes-nla>.

24 "Community Forest Bill won't benefit all, campaigners say," *Bangkok Post*, 21 February, 2019. Accessed February 21, 2019. Available from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1632754/community-forest-bill-wont-benefit-all-campaigners-say>.

25 Since 2010, community land titles were given to four communities, Khlong Yong in Nakhornprathom province west of Bangkok, Mae Awe and Rai Dong in Lamphun province, and Phra That KhingKaeng in Phayao province. At present, 486 communities proposed to the government to manage land in the concept of community land title.

26 "Three panels to be formed to work out new land allocation scheme." Thai PBS, November 7, 2018. Accessed February 25, 2019. Available from <http://englishnews.thaipbs.or.th/three-panels-formed-work-new-land-allocation-scheme/>.

FIGURE 1
A TIMELINE OF LAWS AND POLICIES
RELATED TO LAND IN THAILAND



Compiled by the author by adapting from Hayward (2017)

allocated land, but each provincial governor is designated to officially own and oversee the community land.²⁷ It is controversial that the spirit of communal land and resource management is dominated by the government again (See Figure 1 for a timeline of laws and policies related to land in Thailand).

In sum, the land laws and policies in Thailand demonstrate how land management in Thailand has been dominated by the centralized government. Successively, the government has used land to promote

economic growth in many ways. In addition, a number of studies have noted a corrupt system of issuing DOL and ALRO land title deeds, and leasing and using state-own land.²⁸ Consequently, land ownership has become concentrated in the hands of a small number with access to information, capital, and connections to authorities. The law also does not restrict how many land title deeds one person may hold. Land has been speculated to induce increasing land prices in the market where landless and small landholder peasants cannot access land as a means of production.

27 Sanitsuda Ekachai. "Central govt meddling no forest remedy," *Bangkok Post*, November 26, 2018. Accessed February 28, 2019. Available from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1582270/central-govt-meddling-no-forest-remedy>.

28 See case studies, especially in the North of Thailand, in Miyake (2003), Leonard and Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya (2003) and Lubanski (2012), as well as a "Sor Por Kor 4-01 scandal in the Southern of Thailand" in Bello et al. (1998).

CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY RIGHTS TO LAND

The struggle of the SPFT for land and communal management of land and natural resources can be justified by the concept of community rights as part of an alternative development paradigm. These concepts, especially community land management illustrate an alternative form of development in which local communities create their own path of development. The SPFT has proposed their land management model to demand that power to manage land be shifted from the central state to local people in an attempt to empower the latter toward participating in the process of development and sharing power with the central state. It is a counter-discourse to centralized land management focusing on economic development favouring particular attention to political, social, cultural, environmental and ethical issues for the well-being of the people.²⁹ Alternative development in general puts the primary emphasis on development from below, on self-determination and putting people at its centre, and is part of the discussion on how people partake in governance through participatory democracy.

The land reform movement, including the SPFT, is underpinned by the idea of community rights to exercise collective land and natural resource management. Importantly, it counters the dominant discourse of individual land ownership as property within a capitalist paradigm. Self-determination is also a key concept realized by the right to livelihood and community rights to land resource management. Local communities have employed many strategies to negotiate with the government to gain a role in the decision-making processes of national development. These strategies include public demonstrations, civil disobedience, petitions and negotiation.

It has been argued that community rights have two dimensions: community cultures, and the rights of communities to participate in governance.³⁰ The former is exemplified by ideal rural societies where people live in harmony and help each other to develop their community. The latter promotes local empowerment for negotiating power with the

29 Olga Lucía Castillo Ospina and Juan Masullo Jiménez. "Alternative Development is no longer an alternative—Post-development could be." *Filosofía de la Economía* 6, no. 2 (2017): 99-119.

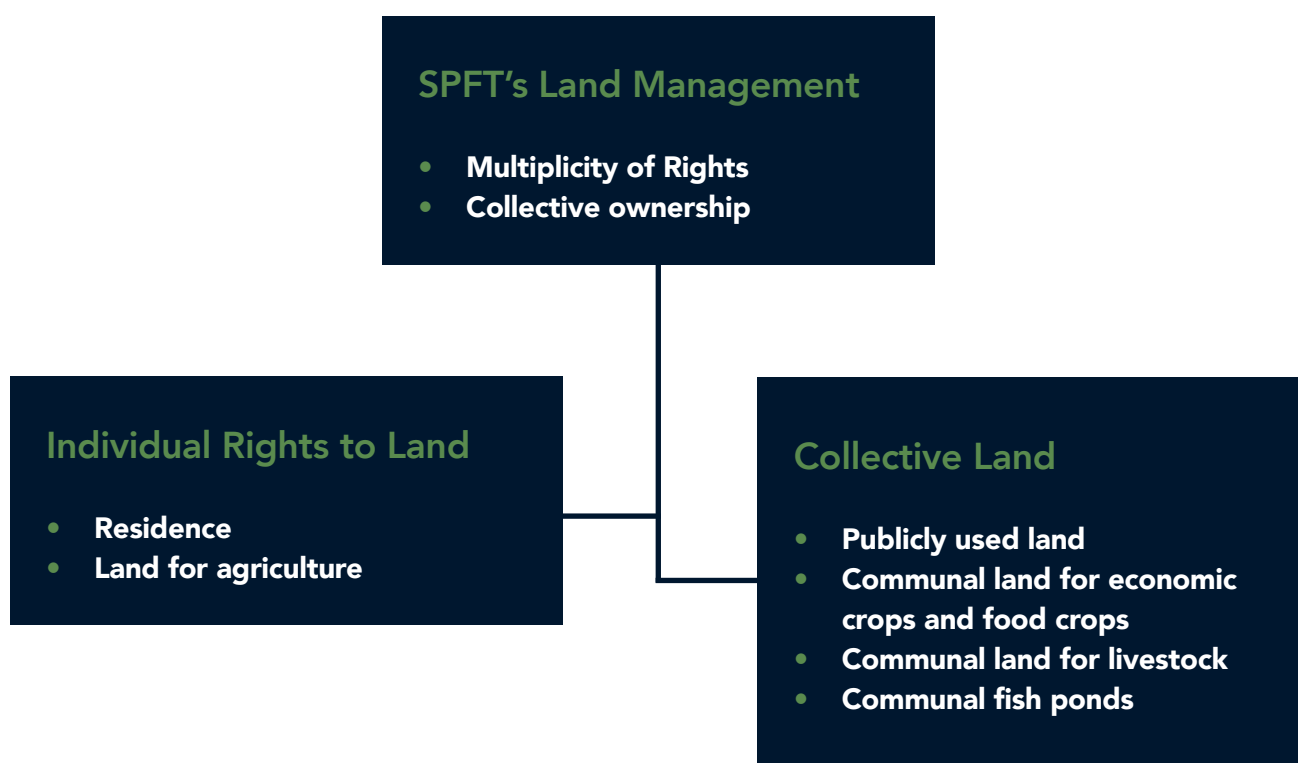
30 Atchara Rakyutidham. "Mainstreaming Alternative Development". *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 30 no. 2 (2011): 13-43. (in Thai).

state and capital. Local people need to share their grievances and ideas to create a sense of collectiveness and solidarity. Collective ideologies and actions have been initiated and developed through community constitutions and regulations to inculcate such ideas in local people. In the case of SPFT, this process is fundamental to integrate new settlers into newly established communities.

In terms of land management, the ideas of multiplicity of rights and communal tenure have been used by community members to negotiate the right to land. The concept of multiplicity

of rights proposes overlapping forms of rights consisting of usufruct rights, management rights, and monitoring rights between an individual and a community coexisting in one area³¹. Through CLT, people can utilise land through communal management, where community members, as one entity, own land collectively, while having the right to utilize their own plots for their respective purposes. Community members are able to access and utilize communal land through sharing labour to make land as productive as possible. (See Figure 2 for the concept of community rights in land management).

FIGURE 2
THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY RIGHTS ON LAND MANAGEMENT



31 Anan Ganjanapan. "Multiplicity of community forestry as knowledge space in the Northern Thai Highlands." *Working Paper Series No. 35, Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies, Shiga, Japan* (2008).

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted between 1 and 5 October 2018 using qualitative methods in four SPFT communities: Klong Sai Pattana, Nam Daeng Pattana, Phoem Sap and Khao Mai located in Chai Buri District, Surat Thani Province. The methods comprised documentary research, focus group discussions, in depth interviews with key

informants, and non-participant observation. The data collection table below shows methodologies and sample sizes:

In the next section, the case study of SPFT illustrates the history of the land reform movement in the South of Thailand, its rationale, approaches, strategies and organisation.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

DATE	COMMUNITY	MALE	FEMALE
3-4 October 2018	Klong Sai Pattana	2	3
4 October 2018	Nam Daeng Pattana	4	6
5 October 2018	Khao Mai	2	3
5 October 2018	Phoem Sap	5	3
TOTAL		13	15

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

DATE	POSITION
1-2 October 2018	SPFT Coordinator
4 October 2018	Representative of women's group in Santi Pattana Community
3-4 October 2018	SPFT secretariat

CASE STUDY OF THE SOUTHERN PEASANTS' FEDERATION OF THAILAND

Land Ownership and Control in the South of Thailand

Situated in the South of Thailand, Surat Thani Province is 529 kilometers (328 miles) from Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. The struggle for land in the south of Thailand started around 2001 and 2002 (B.E. 2544 and 2545) when a network of people's organizations in Surat Thani Province worked with the government to analyze encroachment onto forest lands. The analysis discovered that those who encroached onto forest lands were landless peasants and workers, including some who lost their lands during crop booms, and those who had limited land for farming. This opportunity gave the people's organisation network access to information related to land concessions to the private sector in the South, using the acclaimed 1997 People's Constitution and the Official Information

Act 1997 (B.E. 2540). This information showed that Thai and foreign companies had concessions for 200,000 rai (approximately 32,000 hectares) of forest and reserved forest lands in Surat Thani, including concessions on 60,043 rai (approximately 9,600 hectares) already expired. Moreover, palm oil companies had expanded cultivation outside their concession areas.³² It is arguable that the government facilitated the expansion of oil palm plantations of a few Thai and foreign palm oil companies by accumulating land owned by the RFD and ALRO in order to increase export-oriented crop production during demand booms.³³

According to the Southern Poor People Network³⁴, these companies occupied between 1,000 and 40,000 rai (approximately 160 and 6,400 hectares). This process deprived landless peasants and workers and small-scale landholders of access to land as a

32 The Southern Poor People Network. *"Unveiling the Truth of Forest Garden Concession Investigation. Surat Thani"* (in Thai) (2006).

33 Hall, 2011.

34 Southern Poor People Network, 2006.

means of production. In terms of the analysis primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession by Marx and Harvey³⁵, it is further arguable that large-scale acquisition can be seen as fitting Marx's description of primitive accumulation, where peasants have been deprived of the means of production by the commodification and privatization of land, i.e. deagrarianization (See *additional description in box 1*). Moreover, the process of land concession and land titling negated collective and customary rights to natural resources and the environmental commons.³⁶

Consequently, a land rights movement named the Southern Poor People Network (SPPN) emerged in 2003 to demand that government agencies investigate the expired land concessions of palm oil companies.

Later, the network worked with government agencies, especially the MNRE, to respond to land conflicts in the South. Nonetheless, people from the SPPN took the leading role in investigating land concessions and found that palm oil concessions on more than 70,000 rai (approximately 11,200 hectares) had already expired. At that time, government officials and local authorities responded passively to the issue, which led the network occupying land to call on the government to repossess the land from these companies and redistribute it to landless peasants and workers. Even though the network tried to negotiate with the government through the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRCT), armed government officials cracked down on groups of people under the SPPN in October and December 2003.³⁷

35 David Harvey. "The new imperialism: accumulation by dispossession." *Socialist Register* 40 No. 40 (2004): 63-87.

36 Ibid

37 Southern Poor People Network, 2006.

DEAGRARIANIZATION

Deagrarianization is a process which transforms rural economies and societies out of farming toward non-farming activities. The process is reinforced by neo-liberal capitalism which considers land as a commodity, not a means of production. The process expels peasants from farming activities and agriculture society while transforming them into workers in industries.

In Thailand, a study on farmer registration data in 2018 (Attavanich et.al., 2018) shows more than 50 percent of the country's 5.76 million households possessed agricultural land less than 10 rai (1.6 hectares) per household. The National Statistical Office of Thailand illustrates that the scale of agricultural landholdings has constantly been decreasing over 10 years, by approximately 20 percent—from 91 million rai (14,560,000 hectares) in 2007 to 71 million rai (11,360,000 hectares) in 2016. Such data denotes the increasing number of peasants who lost their agricultural land as a means of production.

Sources: Rigg and Sukunee Nattapoolwat (2001); Attavanich et. al. (2018); <http://statbbi.nso.go.th/staticreport/page/sector/th/11.aspx>

Becoming the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT)

The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) was established in 2008 (B.E. 2551) after the first wave of land occupations ended in 2003 by the aggressive violence of the government. The SPFT reviewed the lessons learned from past experiences to envisage the problems and challenges and eventually re-establish a land rights movement in Surat Thani province. The SPFT discovered that the previous movement prioritized temporary benefits, i.e. land occupation and produce from the land, rather than a long-term goal, i.e. land rights. In the SPFT analysis, the movement did not share a common ideology and goal and lacked consciousness of the land rights struggle. More importantly, the movement lacked discipline and regulations (SPFT Coordinator, interview, 1 October 2018).

Since 2008 (B.E. 2551), the SPFT has gathered landless peasants and workers in Surat Thani Province who see land as a means of production and as the foundation of life. This group has been excluded by centralized land governance in Thailand and neoliberal capitalism. It can be said that SPFT members are those who have been left behind by socio-economic development in Thailand. Most of them who do not hold land are wage laborers in the agricultural sector, especially on rubber and oil palm plantations, while some of them once owned and farmed land but sold it. Many members migrated to seek economic opportunities in urban areas in Surat Thani Province.³⁸ SPFT members realize that land is essential for their subsistence and livelihoods. For them, land is their social safety net. Thus, they joined the efforts of the SPFT to mobilize for land rights.



The SPFT Logo

Based on the lessons learned, the SPFT constructed a solid rationale underpinned by a strong ideology, goals and organizational structure. Its rationale is based on three critical rights of landless peasants and workers:

- 1) The right to land reform for a just society;
- 2) Community rights to manage land and natural resources, and;
- and 3) The right of landless peasants and workers to new community settlements.

The SPFT coordinator explained that the rationale was inspired by land and peasant movements at national and international levels, especially the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT) between 1974 and 1976 (B.E. 2517 and 2519) and the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, known as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)*. In addition, the concept of community rights that arose among social movements in Thailand during the 1980s and was legitimized by the 1997 Thai constitution (SPFT Coordinator, interview, 1 October 2018).

The SPFT also has clear goals in accordance with its rationale, including land rights, peasant rights and democratization. As its short-term

38 Vittaya Aphorn. "Community Land Titles and Livelihood Security for Southern Farmers" (in Thai). *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 33 no. 1 (January-June 2014). (in Thai)

goal, the SPFT aims to achieve equitable land distribution through land reform. This is to ensure that landless peasants and workers have access to adequate housing and food security. As its mid-term goals, the SPFT aims to increase the rights of communities to manage land and essential natural resources, and ensure that these resources serve peasants as the means of production to safeguard community food sovereignty. To achieve this goal the SPFT will establish agricultural reform using community agroecology systems. As its long-term goal, the SPFT aims to establish a democratic society and create new peasant cultures through solidarity and equality.³⁹

As a strategy, the SPFT has promoted the community land title (CLT) campaign by calling on the government to allow communal land management. In order to achieve land reform, the SPFT has advocated three relevant measures: 1) a progressive land tax; 2) a national land bank; and 3) the protection of agricultural lands for peasants. These measures will be discussed in the next section. The SPFT is also a member organization of the People's Movement for a Just Society (P-Move)⁴⁰ which has advocated community land and natural resources management for marginalized people in Thailand with the government at the national level.

In terms of organizational structure, the SPFT has established sections led by a responsible person selected by members of networking communities. These include Political, Technical, Women, Agriculture and Cooperatives, Campaign, Cultural, Media and Information sectors and Secretariat (SPFT Coordinator,

FIGURE 3



Location of Chai Buri and Prasang Districts, Surat Thani Province | Source: Wikipedia

interview, 1 October 2018). The SPFT has also established organizational regulations through its general assembly to govern the activities of SPFT community members. These internal regulations are based on the concepts

39 Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand. *"The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand Booklet"* (in Thai). Unpublished (2016).

40 The People's Movement for a Just Society (P-Move) is a network of local organisations, including the Northern Peasants Foundation (NPF), E-saan Land Reform Network (ELRN), Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN), Banthat Mountain Range Land Reform Network (BMLRN) and Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT), to raise grievances of marginalized people across the country and advocate with the government for more equitable distribution and management of natural resources, e.g. land, water, and forest (Lubanski, 2012).

of democracy, equality, justice, solidarity, accountability, transparency, and communal tenure and benefits.⁴¹ This shows that the SPFT's internal regulations act as a community constitution to which community members conform. Organisational committees and community committees are elected regularly through democratic votes because based on its experience, the SPFT intends to prevent the emergence of a dominant leader inclined to corruption.

Profiles of the SPFT Communities

Chai Buri, one of 19 districts in Surat Thani province, is where *KlongSai Pattana*, *Nam Daeng Pattana*, *Phoem Sap* and *Khao Mai* communities are located; while *Santi Pattana* community is in Phra Saeng District (see figure 3 for the location of Chai Buri and Prasang Districts). These five communities are newly settled where landless peasants and workers have gathered to seek land as a means of production, and to pursue land and natural resource management in compliance with communal tenure under the concept of CLT. The land where the communities are situated is owned by state agencies, including ALRO and the RFD, as well as land unused for a long period with titles claimed by private sectors, especially palm oil companies.

According to interviews with community members, they started assembling and occupying land between 2006 and 2013 after the first attempt at land occupation in the early 2000s. Community members reported that they assisted government agencies to investigate expired and illegal oil palm concessions owned by both international and national capitalists. Even though the SPFT and its community members successfully assisted

government agencies in legal proceedings against the palm oil companies, community members have not been permitted to legally settle on those lands, instead of temporary occupation. This demonstrates the insincerity of government agencies in tackling land conflicts and inequitable land distribution.

It is remarkable they have employed land occupation as a way of claiming community rights to land for peasants. A Khao Mai community member said *"We occupied land to put pressure on the government since the government lacked motivation in land reform and equitable land distribution. We had used formal ways by coordinating with the government to investigate expired land concessions of palm oil companies but there was no progress in expropriation"* (Interview, 4 October 2018). However, community members who have occupied land have been seen by the government, palm oil companies and neighboring communities as squatters violating the law.

Threats and Violations

During land occupation and settlement, community members have encountered different types of violence, including assassination, forcible eviction, arbitrary arrest and detention, destruction of properties and crops, intimidation, and judicial harassment. As reported in international and national news, all communities interviewed said that they have been threatened by unidentified armed groups which the community members believe are connected to some extent to palm oil companies and local influential groups. Apart from intimidation such as random gunfire into communities at night, destruction of houses and crops, and trespass by local influential groups with soldiers, four members

41 Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand, 2016.

of Klong Sai Pattana Community have been assassinated.⁴²

These incidents were recorded in the national and international media as assassinations of land rights defender, for example *“After violent struggle for land, Thai campaigners face challenge to community farming”* by Reuters and *“Harassed by palm oil company, Thai village defends land”* by Aljazeera.⁴³ Unfortunately, only two cases, of Chai Bunthonglek and Supot Kalasong, went to court. But none of the perpetrators have been brought to justice because all cases ended in acquittal with the court claiming insufficient evidence.⁴⁴ In terms of an exclusion framework, SPFT community members have been excluded from a means of production by regulations, markets, force and legitimation.⁴⁵ To safeguard community members, security measures have been employed by setting up checkpoints around communities. For example, four security posts are located at Klong Sai Pattana where all community members take shifts as community security guards every 12 hours to monitor security 24 hours a day. The community is restricted to one entrance and exit and the gate is opened at 6 a.m. and closed at 6 p.m., except for emergencies. To commemorate the struggle of land rights defenders, the SPFT built a memorial in Klong



The SPFT built a memorial in Klong Sai Pattana Community to commemorate the plight of land rights defenders | Photo credit: Supatsak Pobsuk, 2018

Sai Pattana Community comprising a white foundation with a coiled spring representing continual evolution and three stars on top: red for struggle; green for the prosperity of peasants; and yellow for morality.

42 List of SPFT members killed since 2010:

- a. 11 January 2010: Mr. Somporn Pattaphum was shot dead during dinner at his home.
- b. 19 November 2012: Ms. Montha Chukaew and Ms. Pranee Boonrat were shot and killed while on their way to a local market. Their bodies were mutilated by the gunmen to intimidate other community members.
- c. 11 February 2015: Mr. Chai Bunthonglek was shot dead by two gunmen when he was visiting his relative's house.
- d. 08 April 2016: A gunman attempted to shoot Mr. Supot Kalasong when he was driving to his community. He was rescued by other community members and immediately taken to hospital.

43 For further news please see: *“Thai land rights campaigners’ most powerful weapon? Access to information”* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-landrights-idUSKCN0ZU00U>, and *“Four murders and a bloody battle for land rights in Thailand”* at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-landrights-idUSKCN0Z9006>.

44 Fortify Rights. *Follow-up Submission to the U.N. Human Rights Committee on Thailand's Compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* (2018). Retrieved from https://www.fortifyrights.org/downloads/Follow-up_Submission_to_the_UN_Human_Rights_Committee_on_Thailands_Compliance_with_the_ICCPR_July_2018.pdf, accessed on 30th October 2018.

45 Hall et. al., 2011.

In addition to the violence, the palm oil companies have used judicial harassment to prosecute community members. Community members have been charged with three criminal offenses: trespass, mischief and criminal association. Fifteen (15) members in *Nam Daeng Pattana Community* have been charged with these offenses.⁴⁶ Even though all communities under the umbrella of the SPFT are part of a resolution of land conflicts between government agencies and P-Move, criminal cases have proceeded against community members. The SPFT requested assistance from the Justice Fund Office in the Ministry of Justice for community members' legal fees, but community members reported that the response was not timely. Community members said *"We have never had access to justice since we settled here. When our community was threatened by outsiders affiliated to palm oil companies, even the local police have never taken our cases"* (Nam Daeng community member, interview, 4 October 2018).

Community Land Title as Alternative Practice of Land Governance and Management

"More than land and solidarity of peasants' community is food sovereignty and human dignity" (SPFT motto)

This case study of the SPFT shows an alternative development approach by applying community rights to land and natural resources as a countervailing approach and practice to the dominant development discourse underpinned by the centralized power of the state and capitalism. Even though the SPFT communities are newly settled in occupied lands, the SPFT has developed an alternative

development model by promoting the rights of landless peasant and workers to access to land which counters inequitable land distribution and the commodification of land. The SPFT frames their struggle for land and agroecology with a critical difference from the top-down centralized development model in Thailand. The SPFT communities see land as a fundamental right of peasants. As such, land serves community members as a means of production, i.e. a foundation of community settlement and a source of subsistence livelihoods. In addition, the right to land and agriculture can be seen as a safety net and social capital where community members ensure that land and natural resources will be maintained for their descendants.

The SPFT considers that the concept CTL is suitable for community land management after they realized that the centralized land management lacks community participation. They have learned that collective land ownership offers better security of land ownership for agricultural purpose than private land tenure. Communal tenure is the key concept where all community members own land collectively. This goes beyond existing forms of land tenure in Thailand, namely state-owned and private land. CLT can be seen as the way that local people participate democratically in land management. In other words, the concept of community rights is reified as CLT which aims to empower people in a democratic society. CLT is also a tool to decentralize decision-making power to local people on issues related to their everyday life, especially livelihoods. Community members participate democratically in setting regulations for land use within their community. Collective land ownership guarantees that land is used and owned by local people in a productive way, particularly for agriculture. Land cannot be sold

⁴⁶ Please read further detail on Protection International, 2017, "The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand under attack" at <https://www.protectioninternational.org/en/node/408>, accessed on 25th October 2018.

to outsiders but is restored to the community whose members decide how to make land productive. CLT represents a multiplicity of land rights between individuals and the community because people are able to utilize their land and at the same time, manage land collectively as part of the community, in accordance with mutually determined community regulations. Ultimately, CLT represents a bottom-up approach to resist centralized land management and the commodification of land and to suspend processes of deagrarianization.

Along with CLT, two proposed policies, a progressive land tax and a national land bank, have been advocated in order for local people to access land. A progressive land tax will mitigate the concentration of land and land speculation as it requires those who own unproductive land to pay revenues in accordance with the amount and size of land they owned.⁴⁷ A national land bank, funded from a progressive land tax, will purchase or lease land and distribute it communities that manage it in compliance with CLT. These communities will reimburse the land bank through their cooperatives.⁴⁸ In 2011, the Thai Government established the Land Bank Administration Institute (LABAI)⁴⁹ as an organization that collects information regarding unproductive land owned by the Thai state, local governments and private individuals, which the Institute will then buy or lease for landless peasants or small landholder peasants. Another mission of LABAI is to establish a national land bank as a land fund to assist peasants who need agricultural land for subsistence.

The SPFT plans for land development through participation of community members counters the formulaic land distribution model introduced by ALRO. ALRO has proposed that a small-scale farmer should have five rai (0.8 hectares) as an agricultural plot and one rai (0.16 hectare) for housing, the so-called 5+1 model. The SPFT argued that imposing this top-down ratio is deficient in local participation because the state agencies have not consulted community members to decide how their communities should be developed in accordance with their particular contexts. For example, ALRO aims to apply the 5+1 model to all SPFT communities without consultation with community members. In Khao Mai Community, a community member said *"The authorities haven't talked about land and community development with us. They told us that 5 rai for farming is enough but they have no idea about our context and people. Also, they proposed digging a 200-rai-pond [32 hectares] for a community water source. No one in our community wants a pond on this scale which is way beyond our needs. The authorities have no concern about our livelihoods since they want to construct new roads and other public utilities across our farm plots and destroying our cultivated products"* (Interview, 4 October 2018). The SPFT communities also questioned the criteria of landless people who need an agricultural plot as they have realized that those registered in the government system are people who do not need land for farming but they have obtained their places in the list through corrupt networks and patronage system. Those who benefitted from the government land redistribution

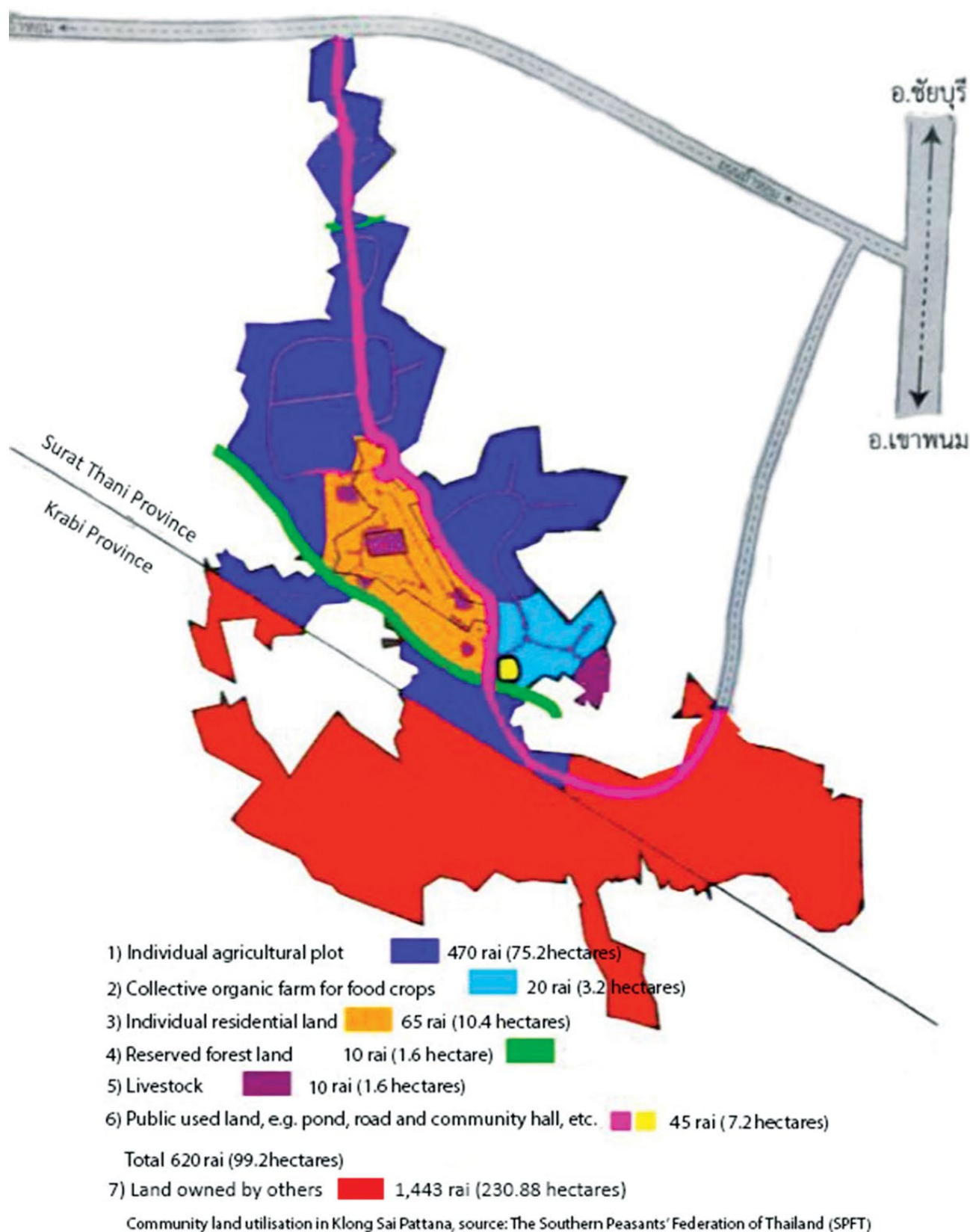
47 The bill on land and building tax was approved by the National Legislative Assembly (NLA) in November 2018. The law will be effective after it was published in the Royal Gazette, but the taxation will be commerce from 1st January 2020. However, it is criticized that a tax rate for unproductive land is low, 0.3% for every three years and capped at 3%, which may not reduce land concentration in Thailand. See further on <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1577190/nla-passes-long-awaited-land-tax-bill> and <https://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/1576418/new-land-tax-bill-nears-nla-approval>, accessed on 2nd March 2019.

48 Lubanski, 2012; Hayward, 2017.

49 For further information on the Land Bank Administration Institute, please see <http://www.labai.or.th/>

FIGURE 4

COMMUNITY LAND UTILIZATION IN KLONG SAI PATTANA BASED ON THE INTERESTS OF THE COMMUNITY



Source: Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT)

system need to comply with regulations set by ALRO, including requiring people who are allocated land to plant cash crops promoted by the government, e.g. cassava, rubber, sugar cane and maize. Without good consultation and communication with local communities, a report showed 10% of nationwide beneficiaries returned land to the ALRO.⁵⁰

In terms of community land management, the SPFT communities have demonstrated alternative land governance and management by dividing land into six categories as follows:

- 1) Individual agricultural plots;
- 2) Collective organic farm for food and market crops;
- 3) Individual residential land;
- 4) Reserved forest land;
- 5) Land for livestock;
- 6) Land for public use.

For example, Klong Sai Pattana Community members agreed on land use regulations where each household has one rai (0.16 hectare) for housing and 10 rai (1.6 hectares) for a household agricultural plot, including



A SPFT community member was transporting food crops to a local market | Photo by SPFT, 2017

50 "Farmers returned 10% of agricultural land as required to make more investment and forced into doing agriculture" (in Thai), *Khaosod*, October 16, 2017. Accessed October 29, 2018. Available from https://www.khaosod.co.th/economics/news_572994, accessed on 29 October 2018



Processed food products and agricultural products made by SPFT communities show how SPFT community members diversify food options and gain recognition from outsiders | Photo by Supatsak Pobsuk, 2018

market crops such as rubber, palm oil, bamboo, and banana, etc. as well as food crops. In this way, community members are able to both secure subsistence livelihoods and generate cash income. There is 20 rai of communal farmland for both market and agroecologically grown food crops such as organic vegetables and rice to ensure food sovereignty. The community aims to demonstrate organic and non-chemical methods of sustainable agricultural food production as an illustration of their coexistence with nature. On the collective farm, community members work together on food and market crops and share the profit from selling the produce. For example, Khao Mai Community has planted 4 rai (0.64 hectares) with bamboo where all community members jointly invest, plant, harvest and sell products together. Sixty percent (60%) of the profits go to members while the other 40% is set aside for the next crop, community administration costs and other urgent community expenditures agreed on by community members. The community spares 10 rai of land for livestock where community members have learned how to produce organic manure. Approximately 35 rai (5.6 hectares) is public space including

a community pond, a community hall, a community kitchen, an herb garden and a monument. (Please see Figure 4 for Land Utilization in Klong Sai Pattana Community).

Community Economic Practices

The SPFT established two mechanisms, the Agricultural Cooperative of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (ACSPFT) and a land fund to support its communal land management in accordance with CLT. The ACSPFT serves as a community entity for administering community land and as a cooperative business centre which collects agricultural products from community members and distributes them locally on their behalf. For example, the SPFT has set up an oil palm fruit collection centre on behalf of the ACSPFT in Phoem Sap Community to negotiate the price of the commodity, ensuring that community members are not unfairly treated in the market. It can be argued that the SPFT has created an alternative production-distribution system. The cooperative is a place for community members to save money and access financial services such as loans. The community

land fund is a means for communities to save money for redistribution as a seed fund to secure community land. Both mechanisms have ensured socio-economic and land security for local communities. Such mechanisms can be said to show the readiness of the SPFT in community land management.

Women in the SPFT communities take a leading role in food processing and sale of products through the ACSPFT. Currently, pickled bamboo shoots and banana chips are well-known products of SPFT community members. The pickled bamboo shoots are processed without chemical additives, using only water and salt. Community products, including processed food products and agricultural products, have been promoted by the District Office as organic foods.

"I guarantee that our community products are produced locally by organic methods unlike other communities in this district. Our products are good enough for the Thai authorities to invite us to showcase them at the district office promoting clean and organic food. While the District officials gain a reputation, they ignore our struggles for land" (SPFT Coordinator, interview, 1 October 2018). Nonetheless, the SPFT has seen this opportunity as a way to promote its communities and to gain recognition from outsiders.

As newly settled communities, community welfare safety nets have been initiated. With the ACSPFT, community members contribute to welfare savings funds at one baht per day, which will be allocated to community welfare, including healthcare and education. For example, community members will receive transportation costs for travel to hospital. As small-scale peasants, it is quite difficult for

them to access financial services. The SPFT has created another community savings fund to provide microcredit to members. Community members can save at least 100 baht per month and earn 7% interest per year with 3% covering ACSPFT administration costs. Loans can be accessed at low interest rates. The SPFT continues to develop welfare measures to support community members; a woman in Santi Pattana Community said *"In the future, we are thinking of initiating community healthcare services, and community care centers for children and the elderly to ensure that our community members have necessary social protection"* (Interview, 4 October 2018).

Grassroots Democracy

The SPFT is a new social movement that aims to create a political space for negotiating with controlling powers, in this case, the state and capital.⁵¹ The SPFT has raised grievances, and requested changes in land policies and an increase in the bargaining power of local people in the management of land and natural resources. That being said, the SPFT is a group of landless peasants and workers who lost land as their means of production through continued primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession⁵² which marginalized them at the edge of development. The case of the SPFT explicitly illustrates grassroots democracy and participatory development. The SPFT case shows how local people form groups, build formal and informal networks, and use different types of approaches and strategies to resist and challenge injustice. They are active agents who know what they want and how to manage and use their resources in a way that benefits themselves and their communities.⁵³

51 Hank Johnston. *What is a Social movement?* (UK: Polity, 2014).

52 Harvey, 2004.

53 Benedict Kerkvliet. "Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 36.1 (2009): 227-243 cited in Jakkrit Sangkhamanee. "Democracy of the desired: Everyday politics and political aspiration in the contemporary Thai countryside." *Asian Democracy Review* 2 (2013): 5-37.



In alliance with P-Move, SPFT members joined a public demonstration to call for land reform in Thailand
| Photo by P-Move, 2019

Like other social movements, the SPFT has employed resistance through protest as a form of civil disobedience which is recognized as direct participatory democracy. They expressed their grievances on the ineffectiveness of the Thai bureaucratic system in formulating and implementing land and natural resource management. The SPFT has seen the politics of protest as a resistance tool to bargain for power with government agencies and to demand development from below. In alliance with P-Move, the SPFT has joined public demonstrations on the streets and at government offices to demand policy changes and concrete action on their problems. However, the current authoritarian context in Thailand has not fully allowed mass political mobilization. The SPFT has merely filed petitions and requested formal meetings with the responsible government agencies once they encountered threats. It is worth noting that the SPFT is one among

other well-organized social movements, which indicates that local people are not passive and submissive to injustice.

In the SPFT structure, a political section has been set up to monitor and analyze the political and socio-economic situation in Thailand in order to formulate strategic plans, tactics and policy. The SPFT has also realized that its community members should understand and crystallize the context of the struggle for land so that they can develop collectively their political class identity which builds community unity and eventually provides a positive impact on SPFT mobilization. In this case, a political school has been forged to share ideas and concepts among community members. The SPFT's political section has conducted regular political education programs in communities to build the political knowledge and capacity of community members, especially the young

generation. The SPFT has regularly engaged academic scholars at universities to conduct critical research in their communities and organize public events to raise awareness of the struggle for land and equality in Thailand.

Networking Strategies

The SPFT has organized open activities, particularly community activities, and usually invites neighboring communities to join as they have seen such participation as a tool to gain acknowledgment from other communities and eventually make their struggle visible and understandable in the eyes of the public. For example, Santi Pattana Community celebrated its 11th community anniversary on 28 October 2018 and invited nearby communities to participate in sports activities and performances. A community member said *“We used community activities such as sports and performances to build solidarity and harmony. Beyond that, we normally invite*

our friends from other communities to join and to learn how we live...In this way, they understand who we are and why we needed to occupy land” (Community member in Santi Pattana Community, interview, 4 October 2018). The SPFT said that after they engaged other communities in SPFT activities, the attitudes of outsiders had changed positively. A community member said *“In the past, others called us a mob. We felt uncomfortable when we went outside our community as others did not welcome us...Now they know us more through our activities, they call us a neighboring community”* (Community member in Klong Sai Pattana, interview, 3 October 2018).

The SPFT usually presents itself in the public sphere to raise awareness of the land rights of landless peasants and workers. For example, the SPFT, in collaboration with a university in Surat Thani Province, organized a public forum on the land struggle in the south of Thailand which attracted attention from



The Southern Peasant's Federation of Thailand collaborated with a university in Surat Thani Province to organise a public event disseminating information about people's struggles for land
| Photo by Supatsak Pobsuk, 2018

students and the public. The SPFT believes that a public event is a good opportunity to share their struggles, ideas and concepts regarding communal land and natural resource management.

Amidst intense conflicts and threats, the SPFT approached state agencies such as the NHRCT on human rights-related issues and the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI) under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS) on community development issues. When the communities encountered violence and intimidation, the SPFT acted as their representative in approaching national and international human rights organizations to raise their grievances.

Community Constitutions

As newly settled communities, the SPFT needs solidarity within the community. Community regulations form a community constitution which unites in new settlements people originating from different locations. The community regulations focus on solidarity, justice, morality, collective land management and security measures. It can be said that SPFT community members live together under a common order and discipline. However, the SPFT has promoted a democratic system with in their communities to prevent the emergence of a dominant community leader who may tend to be corrupt and authoritarian. The SPFT has created a political culture where all community members are encouraged to participate in decision-making on community matters from minor issues to community strategies, as stated in its constitution: *“The SPFT aims to create a democratic environment in communities and to encourage all members to participate in decision-making and community development processes.”*

In SPFT communities, community committees have been set up to look after community members and operate community services

and businesses. There are nine committees established in each community, covering coordination, registration, finance, agriculture, development, healthcare, women and youth, security and culture. These committees are elected by community members through voting and take a lead in community issues and coordinate with the central SPFT.

In addition, the SPFT has established internal mechanisms to monitor the function of community regulations with checks and balances. These mechanisms include morning check-ins and monthly meetings. For example, members of Klong Sai Pattana Community hold a daily gathering at 7 a.m. to report on the security situation, disseminate news and information, exercise, sing the community anthem and solve community issues. A community member said *“When we have a community issue, we brainstorm, discuss and seek a solution together. We make sure that we listen to every voice as it is significant...We will reach resolutions collectively through community consensus”* (Klong Sai Pattana community member, interview, 3 October 2018). SPFT communities hold meetings twice a month. For example, Santi Pattana Community, holds meetings on the 8th and 20th of each month to discuss problems and lessons learned, share ideas and information and seek solutions for community development.

Building Community Cultures

It is important to build a spirit of solidarity among new settlers, especially through culture. The SPFT presents itself as a group of landless peasants and workers and has reinvented a peasant culture. The SPFT believes that this culture forges harmony among community members where the SPFT attempts to show the importance and value of the link between land and peasant life. From the struggle for land as life, the movement has attempted to develop a sense of political class-based identity among community

members through collective activities, especially sharing labour on collective farms. Collective farms are where community members take turns to work on preparing the soil, seeding, planting, harvesting, selling and sharing.

The SPFT has also encouraged community members to participate in community activities such as the morning assemblies for sharing information, exercise and singing SPFT songs, monthly meetings for discussions and consultations, and other community activities such as religious ceremonies and sports activities. In this way, the SPFT believes that a harmonious and stable society can be established in the communities which will be strengthened to negotiate with the power of the state and capitalism.

To some extent, the SPFT communities are not closed communities as they give conditional welcomes to new community members. The SPFT welcomes landless peasants who really want to work on agriculture and live in a peasant culture. A new community member or family will be given a three-month probation during which they receive 1 rai (0.16 hectare) for settling and planting food crops. During the probation period, the new member or family will be monitored by community committees for their participation in community activities such as security details, community meetings, collective farming and other voluntary work, and to review how they conform to community regulations. They will also learn how suitable their lives are to a peasant society where land and agriculture are the primary sources of their livelihoods.



Community members in Klong Sai Pattana community harvesting rice on the communal paddy which was formerly a large-scale oil palm plantation. Sharing labour among community members promotes peasant culture and builds a collective peasant identity | Photo by SPFT, 2016

Women Empowerment

The SPFT has promoted the participation of women in communities and empowered them to get involved in community development; its constitution states that SPFT members should respect human and women's rights and promote gender equity in their communities. Women in SPFT communities have been empowered to participate in the struggle for land. Access to land for women secures community food sovereignty. A woman from a SPFT community expressed *"Not many people realize how women are related to land issues. Women are restricted in their access to land which is a source of food for their family. Women are the food distributors and primary caretakers in their households. If women cannot access land, I believe that other problems, such as domestic violence, will happen in their families"* (Woman from Santi Pattana Community, interview, 4 October 2018).

The SPFT's women's groups have been formed to work on community food production on collective land for food crops such as rice, vegetables, bananas, bamboo and coconut, and raising chickens and ducks for eggs. However, a gender division of labor has been employed by community members in production roles on collective farms. For instance, men prepare land and mow while women do seeding and planting. Community members sell all harvested products for the communities or use them for community activities. In addition, women's groups take a leading role in food processing such as banana chips and pickled bamboo shoots. Women in each community hold monthly meetings where they discuss how women participate in community development and initiate activities to empower women in communities. In 2018, the women group of the SPFT received the human rights defender award of the Year 2018 by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, as part of a civil society organization which promotes, defends and protects human rights in Thailand.

CONCLUSION

The case study of the Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand (SPFT) examines how peasants in Surat Thani province struggle for land. The struggles are illustrated through alternative practices of land governance and management, economic activities, grassroots democracy, networking strategies, community constitutions, building community cultures and women empowerment. The following points are to recapitulate the struggle for land by the SPFT.

First, land reform in Thailand has not been successfully formulated or executed because of the domination of land management by the centralized power of the Thai state, which is orientated toward capitalism. As a result, land has never been distributed equitably and landless peasants have difficulty in accessing land as a means of production.

Second, due to ineffective land management in Thailand, the SPFT used land occupation as a strategy to claim the right to land; however, community members encountered violence and judicial harassment. The SPFT hoists the flags of land rights for landless peasants, human rights, democracy and food sovereignty to counter the dominant discourse of land management in Thailand by developing alternative practices in relation to economic, political, social and

cultural practices as strategic tools to counter centralized land management.

Third, the concept of community rights has been employed to legitimize people's struggle for land. This concept has promoted community participation in decision-making on development. It also proposes development from below and encourages the idea of self-determination. Eventually, local people aim to create participatory development and democracy. Community land title (CLT) has been introduced as a concrete realization of community rights to counter the predominant system of state-owned and private land ownership in Thailand. It proposes that land can be owned and managed by community members. In this sense, community members own land together while allowing individuals to use and access lands based on agreed upon rules for both individual needs and community benefits.

Lastly, the SPFT has called for equitable land distribution in Thailand. It has proved that land management should be contextualized as there are alternative practices of land management. Local people have been empowered to manage their resources based on their interests and knowledge. They have also demanded involvement in decision-making processes of development and bargained power with the Thai state.

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