



RESEARCH BRIEF

The Mae Chaem Model: A new blueprint for sustainable rural development in northern Thailand?

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What is the Mae Chaem Model?

The MC Model is a state-directed project approach designed to solve a suite of social and environmental problems identified in Mae Chaem district. It follows in the footsteps of earlier large-scale multi-sectoral projects, but claims it can create a blueprint type “model”. Officially, its main objectives are: “to sustainably stop i/ smog; ii/ agricultural expansion in NFRs; iii/ monocropping in NFRs; and iv/ the general use of chemical pesticides and fertilizer”. Solving land rights disputes between the state and citizens, whilst increasing forest cover for watershed conservation purposes are additional objectives. In its mission statement, the Model draws upon development narratives including, “community-based forest management”, “ecosystem restoration”, “cross-sectoral participation” and supporting “alternative income-generating activities”. It is envisaged that the lessons learned can then be transferred to other upland districts of northern Thailand.



Typical scenery in the MC sub-district of Ban Thap, targeted for piloting the MC Model. Typically, it has a mosaic of maize, upland rice cultivation and natural forest remnants. The area is considered to be a “hotspot” source of haze pollution from burning forest and maize crop waste. The predominant ethnic group in the villages involved being Karen, who are gradually being assimilated into mainstream Thai society.

Which actors are involved?

- The current military regime via its “Pracharat” (people’s state) Committee, setting overall project aims and direction.
- All state line agencies at district level (e.g. Forestry, Fishery, Agriculture, Land Development, etc) and sub-district authorities (e.g. Tambon Administration Organization) are involved in a district-level Committee, chaired by the District Chief
- Several national and local NGOs, including Raks Thai Foundation, invited to participate
- The private sector, led by the CP Group (the largest agribusiness in Asia) through its corporate social responsibility-oriented CP Foundation



Above: The CP Foundation project manager points to a recently established coffee plantation, which should provide its first yield in a few year’s time. The production is destined to be sold in CP’s flagship 7-11 convenience stores, with farmers assured a “good price”, creating “a win-win” situation. Below: Part of the irrigation system installed at a smallholder plot in Ban Gong Gai village



A staged demonstration of cooperation in dam building between staff of CP Foundation and Karen recipients in Ban Gong Gai, Ban Thap sub-district.

Does it differ from past rural development models?

- There do not appear to be any significant differences, apart from the substantial involvement of CP Group as a corporate sponsor and major implementing partner. This differs from the past dominant paradigm where funding was primarily from the state’s own budget or prior to 2000, also supplemented with ODA funds.
- This corporate involvement significantly alters the dynamics of the Model in terms of actor interaction, finance and goal setting approaches. There are both opportunities and risks involved for all parties involved, including the danger of co-optation of civil society, thus reducing the prospect of critical engagement locally.
- While the MC Model claims to be more “integrated” and “participatory” than earlier centrally-planned development projects, the evidence on the ground suggested otherwise.
- There were anecdotal reports that in villages that had joined the project, the level of debt was far higher than in villages not part of the MC Model. Supposedly, only 15 villages remained out of 30 that had initially joined the Model, raising questions about long-term viability
- A senior local official reported that a District steering committee met regularly when it was first begun under a former District Chief, but the committee meets less frequently now and there is reduced confidence that it will succeed.



A CP Foundation field staff explains the objectives of the water resources development project, designed to help irrigate smallholder coffee plantations.



The Ban Gong Gai village headman in a newly established coffee and fruit tree orchard. Only established in 2017, the main capital costs are provided by CP, with recipient households expected to provide labour



A sign board with logos and outline for a multi-stakeholder water resources development project in Ban Thap Sub-district. This is part of the “Mae Chaem Model Plus” – a revised version of the original Model, given financial backing and technical support by the CP Group, as well as regular state agencies. Below: A post-harvest maize field in Ban Gong Gai. Animal feed maize remains the mainstay of the local economy, though its environmental sustainability is questionable.



The CP Foundation have built and paid for a nursery to grow on coffee seedlings, as the project intends to expand from 40 rai to 150 rai of plantation across 3 villages over the next two years.