

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND THIER MOVEMENT IN THE PROTESTING OF YUAN RIVER DIVERSION PROJECT

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Santipap Loedphichianphaibun who lives in Mae Ngao village, Mae Hong Son Provinces, Thailand. His villages Mae Ngao is the meeting point of the Yuan River and Ngao River. Most villagers depended on fishing, farming, agriculture, finding vegetables from the forest like mushroom, yam, bean, peanut, and selling to the local market. Ngao River, Yuan River, their forest, and their mountain look like a paradise for these people because these environment give everything that is the basic need for the people. The communities don't need to worry for their livelihood. Santipap's family stayed along the Ngao river and his family depend on fishing, agriculture and local shop in front of his house.



Meeting Point of Yuan River and Ngao River

Photo: Likhit

Most of Mae Ngao communities are Karen Indigenous people. Some of them can't speak and understand the local Thai language. Mae Ngao village has around 60 households, and almost half of them don't have ID cards and certificates for their properties. Because of they don't have ID cards, they can't access to the same rights like other people who have a National ID.



Santipap and His Father

Photo: Mae Ngao Youth

“ We are Karen Indigenous People and most of our villagers don't have Thai National ID card and certificate for our properties. If this project is actually happened all of our house, our garden, our farm and our children future will be lost. On the other hand all of our knowledge and culture that we want to inherit to our generation will be meaningless. We are minorities group of people and we don't have power. So, it's impossible that the government will refund for all of our properties. We are worried about our generation's future and their livelihood.”

In the year 2017, Santipap heard about the Royal Irrigation Department wants to make the water diversion project in Yuan River to deliver water to Bhumibol Dam which is the biggest dam in Thailand. That is why, they need to make a water pumping station and big tunnel to deliver water. The government will use 70.7 billion baht to make this project. The dam was 69 meters high and the storage capacity will be 68.7 million cubic meters that will construct on a 2,075-rai plot of forest land and the project will impact 36 villages from 3 provinces including Tak, Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai Provinces.

Royal Irrigation Department said the villagers can get a lot of benefit from this project. Mae Ngao village will be the tourist attraction area in the future that is why the villager can get income by selling their local products or food to the tourist. And the government will give the remedy for the tunnel impact areas. At first, Santipap and all of their villagers don't have any idea about this. The villagers started to understand about this project after one of women youth leader from Tha Rue village and NGOs come to explain them about impact of this project.

The project also has the EIA by the Naresuan University without the participation of community people. EIA was already passed by the National Environmental Committee, and the situation was waiting to pass the Cabinet. EIA said Mae Ngao village, the project will only impact around 4 households and the location of the tunnel will start around 2 km far from the village.

But actually it is not true. The water pumping station is planned to build in the Mae Ngao village and the tunnel will start from this village, Mae Hong Son province through Chiang Mai Province.

The government don't have transparency and don't give the chance for the community to participatory in EIA process. This is the main point that make the community worried for their livelihood. Community Leader said

“ We are Karen Indigenous People and most of our villagers don't have Thai National ID card and certificate for our properties. If this project is actually happened all of our house, our garden, our farm and our children future will be lost. On the other hand all of our knowledge and culture that we want to inherit to our generation will be meaningless. We are minorities group of people and we don't have power. So, it's impossible that the government will refund for all of our properties. We are worried about our generation's future and their livelihood.”



Fishing Area of Mae Ngao Communities

Photo : Likhit



Mae Ngao Village's Youth & Their Protesting Sign

Photo : Mae Ngao Youth

That is why, the youth started their protesting. As their first step they joined the youth capacity building campaign in Submoei District. They build four river youth network in this campaign. Their network includes youth around Salween river, Yuan River, Mei River, and Ngao River. They create “NO DAM” posters, signs, and river maps in this campaign.

After this campaign, Santipap organized youth to draw the Symbolic “NO DAM” posters. They hanged these posters around their village and on the highway.



Mae Ngao Community's Protesting Sign

Photo : Likhit

Santipap said :

“ If we hang like this, the government can't lie about the community people accept this project because all people that pass the highway will see these posters. We will never accept the project, we will fight until it stops”.

Other youths in their village take the responsibility to explain the impact of the project to elder people who don't understand the impact of the project.

Every time the water government come to explain them about the project, youths always prepared a “NO DAM” sign and posters to show their attitude to the government.

In the “International river Days” on March 14. They joined the forest ordination activities which involved different religions cultures like Buddhist ceremonies, Christian religions, and traditional ceremonies for raising wild ghosts. They discuss about their problems, reading the statement, announced the stand against the project and submit the statement to the representative from the royal irrigation department. In this event, youth from Mae Ngao take the responsibilities to read the statement, draw the poster and join in sending the letter to the representative.



Youth Drawing River Map



Youth Poster Demonstration

Photo : Mae Ngao Youth

Because of the lack of transparency and the participatory of the communities in EIA process. The community sends the letter to the Royal Irrigation Department, United Nations, National Human Rights Commission, a representative for the Land, Natural resources, and environment commissions to reconsider this project.

As a result, on November 18-19, 2021 they got the chance to meet with the National Human Rights Commission, government department, and the Naresuan University. All of the community leaders, youths, NGOs attended in this meeting and they got the chance to explain about their problems, attitudes, and the lack of transparency of the government.

Youth Actively involved in the protesting of the project and they also participated in the meeting. As a community leader he said

“ We are very proud of our youth, they love to protect our environment, our knowledge, and our culture. But we only have a primary school in our villages most of our youth have to go out to study. I just want all of the youth to come back and have the same attitude and help each other”.



Mae Ngao village only has a primary school. After finishing this school, all of the children have to go to Mae Salin or Chiang Mai for studying.

The most vulnerable person for the impact of every development project is the women. They worried for their children and their livelihood. One of the women leader and also the mother of the youth said

“ As a mom I always worried for my son. But I am very grateful to see my son participate in this protest. If the project actually happened his life will not be good and I are not sure that can I still support for his education fee like now after the project. And the project is no benefit to my community and my son too”.



River Map Campaign & No Dam Demonstration

Photo by : Mae Ngao Youth

Although they can not stop the project, every protesting step, that they did, it makes everyone around their communities see their attitude and their perception of this project.

Santipap said,

“Since I was first heard I never agree with this Water Diversion Project. Everywhere we go is to stop the project. We have a strong commitment to our youth. Not only me all of us don’t agree with this. We will try until the project stop”.