

3 DECADES OF BATTLE FOR HUMAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS AGAINST THE MAP TA PHUT INDUSTRIAL ESTATE

Authors/Researchers:

EarthRights School students from Cambodia

The Map Ta Phut community is located in the eastern province of Rayong in Thailand. The primary livelihoods of the community in the area are farming and fishing. However, since the establishment of the Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate, some villagers have left, and outsiders have gradually moved in.

The community lived harmoniously before. The environment was good, and the trees covered the village. But now, everything has changed, including the environment.

Challenges faced by the communities

Most of the people in Map Ta Phut are fishermen and farmers. After the industrial estate came into their community, the pollution and hazardous waste made it difficult for the people to rely on agriculture and fishing in the sea for their livelihoods.

Regarding the industrial estate's impact on fishing, local people could earn 1,000 baht daily before the industrial estate was established. But after the industrial estate came to Map Ta Phut, they could only make 500 baht or less. Now, it is even more challenging to access the traditional fishing grounds.

With farming, the industrial estate impacts local farmers due to falling water supply for

use in agriculture. Access to water has become a challenge since then. In addition, incidents of land grabbing and forced eviction took place.

Air pollution and water contamination due to the industrial estate's factories also affect villagers' health. Lung cancer is one of the health problems that the local community is concerned about because factories release harmful chemical substances. Pregnant women are also affected, resulting in the delivery of premature babies.

Primary schools also need to move out because they cannot withstand the chemical odor that the factories produce.

Campaigns against the industrial estate

63-year-old Sawang has witnessed a decrease in income since the industrial estate came to the area. He previously worked in the chemical industry for nearly 20 years. Later, he resigned from work as he became aware of the harmful effects of chemical substances in his workplace.

Sawang started participating in campaign groups to fight for the livelihood of those affected by Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate. He said: "I joined a network for people impacted by the industrial estate. I also participated in a protest march."



Sawang with other meeting participants

Some 3,000 people were engaged in the campaign. He said: "To have a successful campaign, we shall start with small groups with a common idea and interest, and then we can combine small groups to form a bigger group."

The first lawsuit

In 2007, the community filed a lawsuit with the administrative court. It took much work for the community to collect evidence to prove that the industrial factories did not follow the law. The community also petitioned the government to tackle the waste from the factories. But until now, they seem to be ignored.

Moreover, the provincial court did not accept the complaint, saying the community could not provide firm evidence.

The second lawsuit

The community filed a lawsuit with the administrative court. They won the case. However, the industrial estate companies disagreed with the court's ruling. The companies neither cared nor followed the standards.

The community also submitted an open letter asking for the government's actions to improve the local people's livelihoods, education, and health services. They held a protest march from Rayong to Bangkok to submit the letter to the government.

Conclusion

It is evident from the current situation at Map Ta Phut that the strength of campaign groups comes from the commitment of the members. It is essential to initiate a campaign from small groups with similar ideas initially, then combine forces to form a larger group. In addition, local knowledge and information play a crucial role in empowering the community.

Sawang said, "The community needs help from academia because they can support the community in research activities. Moreover, the media is also a tool needed during campaigns to share the information openly with the public."

Since then, the campaign group has also started to change its strategies. The group now focuses more on livelihood, food security, and eco-tourism.

"We took courage to give up the old campaign strategy, which did not work. We now use a new strategy, which is more fruitful. The community members are happy with the results," informed Sawang.

Disclaimer: *This paper represents the opinions of the authors based on their interviews with the community members during the EarthRights School learning field visit in 2023. This paper does not represent the position or opinions of EarthRights or any of the organization's staff. The authors bear responsibility for the accuracy of content in this paper.*