

# WHAT WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND IN ORDER TO PROMOTE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATORY MECHANISMS IN CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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November 2016

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Participatory mechanisms are ubiquitous in conservation and development projects and policies. Nearly every conservation and development project today involves some element of local participation in project operations, design, or environmental and social assessments (e.g., see Gillingham 2001, Brown 2002, Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003), in no small part because of a growing understanding over the last 30 years that effective conservation cannot be achieved without the cooperation and support of local people in the area (Brechin et al. 2002; Berkes 2004; Wells and McShane 2004). Moreover, when it comes to development more broadly, such participatory mechanisms are seen as being vital for transparency, democracy, and justice (e.g., see Brechin et al., eds., 2003; Brosius, Tsing and Zerner 1998). However, it is important to ask not only *if* local participation is elicited in such projects or programs, but *how, when, why*, and *to what ends*. How meaningful do participants consider these participatory mechanisms and do they in fact lead to outcomes that are more successful, democratic, sustainable or just?

Participatory mechanisms are also subject to wide variations that must be better understood in order to understand the extent to which participation may be considered as meaningful (and to whom). Given these variations, ethnographic case studies are extremely valuable in identifying what has contributed to positive experiences, from the perspective of all involved, with a given participatory mechanism, or conversely, the factors that have contributed to shortcomings, dangers, red flags, or critiques of other processes. Such case studies may, in turn, provide theoretical advances about what makes participation meaningful in which circumstances, and to whom.

In this paper, I will first provide a brief, conceptual background to why some participatory mechanisms have been staunchly questioned or critiqued, especially when they involve more surface-level participation that reinforces the expertise or decision-making priorities of outside entities. I then provide two case studies in which local participants in conservation and development projects or policies critique participatory processes and elevate their own alternatives that they suggest would be more meaningful and legitimate than the initial mechanisms put forth. The first (and more in-depth) case study juxtaposes a pair of participatory research projects in northeast Thailand, drawing on ethnographic research carried out in Thailand in 2004. In this research, I found that participants praised Thai Baan (Thai Villagers') research as a valuable participatory project for having meaningfully involved participants from the beginning as project initiators, managers and experts, in stark contrast to a previous participatory project carried out in the same 4 villages in which people were disgruntled that they served a purely support function to an outside researcher. The second case study examines debates over the value and validity of the 2011 Consultation Law passed in Peru, drawing on fieldwork carried out in Peru from 2011-2012. Indigenous leaders from throughout the country critiqued Peru's new Consultation Law, passed in 2011, as being more cosmetic than substantive in involving their communities – allowing for the continued override of community interests despite the promises for enhanced involvement in participatory mechanisms. In order to make participation truly meaningful they demanded the right to give or withhold consent for a given measure. In both cases, I differentiate between outsider-driven versus locally-driven processes and outcomes in order to draw attention to popular perceptions of what constitutes a meaningful form of participation (or conversely, what processes have been critiqued as ineffective and perhaps unjust).

## Participation in Theory and Practice

While it is easy to assume that inviting local people's participation in a process that ultimately pertains to a persons' or communities' interest is both worthwhile and beneficial, in practice, participatory processes are subject to many limitations and critiques.

One of the most common critiques is that participatory projects are frequently initiated by outside government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), transplanted without proper consideration of local conditions or histories (Brosius, Tsing and Zerner 1998), and fail to meaningfully engage local people in decision-making (Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003). Many such projects can be described as classic "designed" projects in which "individuals or institutions outside the community take the initiative in organizing a response to a problem also identified by outsiders" (Seymour 1994: 473).

This type of project, even when involving participation, caters to outsiders' interests and aims, and is less likely to evoke meaningful engagement of project participants. This may be particularly salient given the finding by Brechin, Wilshusen and Benjamin (2003: 160) that "local communities tend to distrust [outside] agencies and their personnel," particularly of international conservation NGOs, development agencies, and multilateral lending organizations, "viewing them as harsh and unsympathetic to their needs and concerns." In such a situation, where outsiders are distrusted yet are driving interventions, it may be that communities are cast as a project partner, yet it is unlikely that participants would feel like equal partners, and may be dissatisfied with the project's or policy's approaches or objectives.

A second and related critique is that development projects, including participatory ones, can reinforce unequal power dynamics and conceptions of expertise. As explained by Tania Li, many participatory projects and interventions have the objectives to "empower people" and "achieve 'genuine' consultation," and yet fail to do so, at least in part because they maintain a strict boundary and "hierarchical divide between experts and those subject to expert direction" (Li 2007: 277, 281). Such interventions may perpetuate or even exacerbate unequal power relations, and in doing so it is no surprise that the result is often ill will or for projects to actually be disempowering.

Cases such as these have contributed to analyses of participatory approaches in conservation and development as tantamount to 'neocolonialism' (Gonzalez 2001: 979; Brown 2002: 7), especially when such projects, despite being participatory, promote preservationist policies or otherwise curtail the access rights of resource users (e.g., see Chapin 2004).

Finally, a last critique of note has less to do with outsiders and more to do with the participants and communities themselves. Unequal power dynamics can be replicated within projects in different ways. For example, Agrawal and Gibson (1999) found that communities are often idealized and presumed to be small, homogenous, and harmonious, while in reality decisions and representations about the community are often dominated by its most powerful voices. As a result, community-based projects may (and often do) cater to the interests of a small, usually more powerful subset, rather than the whole community.

Critiques like these have been analyzed in depth in books like *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, in which the editors reflected upon and analyzed the juxtaposition of the "participatory orthodoxy" and the ubiquitous tales of "participatory processes undertaken ritualistically, which had turned out to be manipulative, or which had in fact harmed those who were supposed to be empowered" (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 1). However, rather than assume all participatory processes and mechanisms are either good, as one might be naturally inclined to do, or bad, as one might be tempted to do after this brief review of critiques, it is necessary to parse out the good from the bad, the risks from rewards, and the red flags from lessons learned. The next two case studies contribute

to this analytical thrust through a multi-level comparative analysis – first comparing different participatory approaches within each case study and then briefly comparing the two case studies to draw attention to what did or could make participation more meaningful for these two sets of participants.

### **Case Study 1: Participatory Research in Sri Songkhram, Thailand**

My first case study compares and contrasts two participatory research projects carried in the same 4 villages in Sri Songkhram, Thailand out as part of the Mekong Wetland and Biodiversity Programme (MWBP). While both projects, at first glance, appeared very similar in aims and approach (with a heavy emphasis on villager collection of fish data), I show that they differ in a range of factors. The first project (a catch monitoring project) was poorly received and quickly discontinued, while the project that followed (Thai Baan research) was more widely considered a success. I highlight distinctions between the first project, which may be roughly characterized as an expert-focused, outsider-driven project, with the subsequent participant-driven and process-oriented project, in order to demonstrate that even seemingly similar participatory projects may be subject to wide variability, especially when it comes to embedded power relations and perceptions of expertise.

#### Site and Context

Sri Songkhram is located in the Lower Songkhram River Basin, which is situated in the Nakhon Phanom province in the Northeast of Thailand. Northeast Thailand is the poorest part of the country and is home to a mix of Lao and Thai language and culture. The Songkhram River is a large tributary of the Mekong River, and has rich fish diversity that includes 182 fish species, as well as over 100 species of birds and over 190 native species of plants (MWBP 2005a). However, this biodiversity has been threatened by a range of factors, including a proposed dam, infrastructure development to support irrigation systems, clearing of inundated forest for agriculture or eucalyptus plantations, pollution, invasive species, and overfishing (MWBP 2005b).

Because of the high fish diversity and biological importance, Sri Songkhram was chosen as one of the demonstration sites for the Mekong Wetland and Biodiversity Programme (MWBP). The MWBP was a \$30 million, 4 country project aimed at enhancing biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of river and wetland resources throughout the Lower Mekong Basin, including Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam. Sri Songkhram was named as a demonstration site 2001, in the preparatory phase of the MWBP. Some of the earliest efforts carried out at this site were a set of participatory research projects (including a participatory resource assessment, a catch monitoring project, and Thai Baan research, which will be described and differentiated next).

The adoption of participatory research projects reflects a “trend toward research projects based on traditional ecological knowledge that are participatory in nature, with the community becoming a partners in the cooperative process of knowledge creating and sharing, as opposed to being the object of research” (Berkes 2004: 627). These also follow in line with a parallel thrust for participatory “action research,” or “emancipatory research,” in which the research is carried out as a “mutually supported learning process” with the goal to “facilitate individual and collective empowerment” (Boog 2003).

I observed the project as an independent researcher from June-August 2004.<sup>1</sup> At this time, Thai Baan (Thai Villagers’) research had been underway for just under a year. My goals during fieldwork were to evaluate the extent to which the project officers considered the project efforts to

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<sup>1</sup> At the time, I was completing a Master’s degree at the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. The School had an institutional connection with the IUCN and supported my travel and research to observe the MWBP.

have been successful and examine the level and type of engagement of village participants with the project. During the roughly two-month period that I spent in Sri Songkhram, I carried out extensive participant observation of activities related to Thai Baan Research, usually 20-40 hours per week interacting with village researchers, and the remainder of my time living and working with the project staff. Each week I attended several research-related meetings, in which different issue groups (e.g., fish, vegetation, ecology) compiled information or reviewed the draft document of research results that had been prepared by project facilitators based upon the information the village researchers had provided. Additionally, I also participated in longer observation trips, such as fishing trips, grazing trips for cows and water buffalo, bamboo or mushroom collection, or visiting sacred sites, as well as non-research related visits of roughly the same duration as official research interactions, including sharing meals and leisure activities. I also traveled with villages and project staff from Sri Songkhram to attend a 4-day exchange visit to Rasi Salai for a Thai Baan conference.

Apart from participant observation, I also conducted interviews with the Sri Songkhram project organizer regarding the project, as well as informal interviews with village researchers drawing on the assistance of English-speaking project staff. Outside of Sri Songkhram, I interacted with and interviewed MWBP program officers in Vientiane, Lao PDR, as well as those associated with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Regional Wetlands and Water Resources program in Bangkok, Thailand.

As part of these interviews with project officers and facilitators in Sri Songkhram, Bangkok and Vientiane, I learned that the Thai Baan research project was regarded in a very positive light, and that the first phases of the project had been deemed a success. Those closest to the project were particularly optimistic about project success and longer-term benefits. The MWBP project officers also expressed interest in replicating the project model in the other demonstration sites of the MWBP: the Stoeng Treng Ramsar site in Cambodia, Attapeu Province in Lao PDR, and Tram Chim and Lang Sen in The Plain of Reeds, Vietnam.

Meanwhile, project officers noted that Thai Baan research followed on the heels of the failure of a previous catch monitoring project, which had elicited frustration and even anger from project participants. The contrast between the generally positive attitude of project officers about Thai Baan research and the negative assessment of the catch monitoring project sparked my interest in why two seemingly similar projects had such divergent results. Both projects consisted largely of environmental data collection and documentation, especially fish-related data, and both were cast as participatory. Despite seeming differences, I highlight several key differences in process and power relations between the two projects.

### Catch monitoring project

The catch monitoring project was carried out in Sri Songkhram in early 2003 and was performed as part of the preparatory phase for the MWBP efforts in the Lower Songkhram River Basin. As part of the project, villagers logged their daily fish catch for a month, including fish names, weight and length. They then provided the data to a project organizer who analyzed the data and relayed the results back to the village participants. The results were given back to the village members after a period of several months.

According to MWBP project officers (whom I interviewed in 2004) many village members felt frustrated with the catch monitoring project, reportedly saying that they did not feel engaged with the project and were angry with the outside researcher at times. As a result of the frustrations, project officers reported that village members asserted that they would no longer participate in that type of research in the future. These negative accounts of the catch monitoring project were confirmed by several project staff spoken to in separate interviews and in separate locations (at interviews in Bangkok as well as in Sri Songkhram).

Despite only having second-hand information about the catch monitoring project, the characterizations of the project design and approach were sufficient to determine that this project was both outsider-driven and outcome-oriented.

Additionally, it is possible, and perhaps even likely, that the goals of the research and the problems identified by outsiders may not match the goals of the participants. For example, one frequent goal of these types of projects is to collect environmental data that can serve as baseline information about biodiversity or otherwise enhance outside understandings about the environment and its uses by people in the focal area. However, the tendency to want to reduce uncertainty in biological data in order to address problems that are complex and integrated with social and political factors has been criticized by many, including Thompson, Wharburton and Hatley (1986) in their study of deforestation rates or Blaikie (1985) in his study of soil erosion. Because environmental problems tend to be complex, projects that attempt to address environmental problems by quantifying biological and ecological factors have been increasingly being brought into question, and instead many political ecologists have suggested the importance of examining and addressing the social, political and economic influences on the formation and perception of environmental problems. Along these lines, projects that focus on biogeographical data without connecting data to livelihood or political factors might reduce the extent to which participants meaningfully engage with project aims and associated project activities.

In essence, this type of project appears to be more outcome-oriented, in addition to being outsider-driven, with a focus on collecting data for the purpose of achieving scientific baselines, publishing results and/or making recommendations for conservation purposes. While this may be a laudable goal in and of itself, it serves outsiders more than participants. It may also hinder the dynamism and adaptability of the project to take on new elements or activities that do not serve the researcher-established end goal.

Moreover, the outsider-driven, data-focused project was marked by a conception of expertise in which it is outsiders that give the research meaning – it elevated the status of the person to whom the data is given and who is charged with analyzing and writing up the findings. This type of project design sets up a contrast: the outsider is privileged as an expert, knowledge-holder while the community members serve a more ancillary, support function as data collectors. It is a common study design but nonetheless is one that is imbued with power relations. This conception of expertise could be expected to reinforce unequal power dynamics between project staff and village participants and to reduce control and feelings of ownership of project participants.

Finally, the lateness of the primary researcher in giving the results back to the villagers contributed to feelings of frustration and distrust. In a study of parks in the USA, Virgin Islands and Ecuador, Stern (2010) found that inconsistency, broken promises of actual or even perceived promises, miscommunications, and delayed actions impacted levels of trust and led to harsh reactions of community members. Similarly, in Sri Songkhram, village members reacted harshly when the outside researcher did not respect the promise of timeliness when returning results.

The catch monitoring project, in short, was subject to many of the criticisms cited in literature for participatory projects. It lacked engagement of village researchers in the project's design, evoked unequal power relations due to the handing off of the research, and furthermore resulted in distrust due to the lack of timeliness in returning the results. Given these factors, it is no surprise that the project resulted in frustration of village researchers and that ultimately it was seen as a failure both by project organizers and village members.

The upside of the failure of the catch monitoring project was that it had revelatory value about the importance of active engagement of all partners in project conceptualization and design and more equal power roles in activities and analysis, thereby setting the stage for consideration of new project designs. Despite having hesitations about the primary researcher in the project (a

person that soon thereafter recused herself from further involvement in community efforts or projects), village members continued to express interest in being involved in a MWBP project regarding community environmental management. Before long, this residual interest materialized in the initiation and conduct of Thai Baan (Thai Villagers') research.

### Thai Baan research

Thai Baan Research was initiated in August 2003, immediately following a meeting ("exchange visit") of village members from Sri Songkhram with visitors from Pak Mun and Rasi Salai, which were the two riverside communities that first carried out Thai Baan Research. The project was facilitated and supported by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Southeast Asia River Network (SEARIN), as part of the larger Mekong Wetlands and Biodiversity Programme (MWBP), but as will be described next was largely led and constituted by the participants themselves. During this initial exchange visit, village members from Pak Mun and Rasi Salai described their experience with Thai Baan Research, which had been carried out in 2001-2002 in Pak Mun and in 2002-2003 in Rasi Salai. In both cases, research had been initiated after dams were built near the communities and the research detailed changes in the diversity and abundance of fish catch post-dam, among other things.

In these other locations, Thai Baan research was carried out as part of advocacy efforts to remove the dams that had greatly impacted local livelihoods. According to my interviews and research documents, village members indicated that by showing the results of impacts of the dam on their lives that they could have greater impact on policy makers and gain an enhanced ability to take part in the dialogue about how future planning could be established to ensure environmental sustainability and livelihood security. This focus on the potential policy implications of Thai Baan research in Pak Mun was evident, for example, in the following quote of the Chairperson of the SEARIN advisory board:

"Pak Mun villagers conducted the Thai Baan Research so they could tell the version of their social reality after the sluice gates were opened. With the empirical data collected by those who know the interconnection of the diversified Mun river ecology...it is hoped that Thai Baan research can validly demonstrate the social reality which was previously simplified and misrepresented...we also hope that their truth will bring about better environmental justice to Thai society" (Sretthachau and Deetes 2004: v)

While no dam had been built in the Lower Songkhram River Basin, village members in Sri Songkhram were aware that this possibility existed and were compelled enough by the experiences in the other sites that they decided to proceed with Thai Baan research in their own watershed. This project initiation and research aims fits broadly within the characteristics of a participant-driven, process-oriented project.

At a basic level, the project can be described as participant-driven given that local participants made the decision to go forward with the participatory research after weighing information presented to them by fellow fishermen. Along these lines, it is worth emphasizing the importance of peer-to-peer connection in the initiation of Thai Baan research in Sri Songkhram. The ties with the other communities that had conducted Thai Baan research were important for the establishment of Thai Baan research in Sri Songkhram and also continued beyond the initial meeting. As of the time that I visited the project, less than a year after its initiation, members of Pak Mun and Rasi Salai had already attended 2 progress meetings in Sri Songkhram about their advances with Thai Baan research, and a small busload of village members from Sri Songkhram went to Rasi Salai for a conference in June 2004. The Rasi Salai conference was attended by many people throughout the Mun river basin, as well as Thai Baan researchers that initiated efforts in Chiang

Khong – it was mostly dedicated to the presentation by Rasi Salai village researchers of their results, but also gave space for others that are involved with research, including village members of Sri Songkhram, to give updates about their experiences. These continued exchange visits served as an additional benefit to the research – namely, they enhanced the social networks of villages in Sri Songkhram, which has been pointed out by some authors as an important feature in community development. For example, Stephen Gudeman has written that “ultimately, development has to do not with capital accumulation but innovation in the relationships of society. Community offers a reservoir of possibilities” (Gudeman 2001: 158). These enhanced relationships and social networks were also an indicator of potentially more equal power relations among project participants and outside advisors or supporters.

The focus on building or strengthening social and community relations reflected a broader commitment toward being process-oriented, in which the goals of the research were closely linked to socio-political concerns and livelihood security. From all accounts, the decision to go forward with Thai Baan research came not out of concerns with biodiversity, per se, but out of discussions about some of the political and economic drivers of environmental problems in other nearby watersheds, and the need to enhance the capacity of village members to seek both environmental conservation and livelihood security.

The socially-informed, process-oriented perspective was emphasized by the Sri Songkhram project officer in his characterization of Thai Baan research. According to him:

“this research is simple, is clear in itself: how livelihood links with society and nature...From the research we have a process for learning, and at the end of the research the people not only have the information, but they also have learned how to work together, and they know about the role of organization. The process is dynamic – it does not stop, it keeps going, and in the future they have a plan.”

In essence, while Thai Baan research did involve the collection of biogeographical information (e.g., about fish, vegetation, and local ecology), which might at first seem to indicate strong parallels with the catch monitoring data collection, the goals of Thai Baan research were not focused solely, or even primarily, on knowledge generation, but rather on capacity building to address vulnerability that was simultaneously ecological (village members were vulnerable to changes in river flow, quality and quantity), economic (since environmental resources were used for livelihood security), and political (since village members previously had limited capacity to participate in decision-making about projects that could affect environmental resources and their livelihoods). The participant-driven, process-oriented approach can be differentiated from outcome-oriented approaches because they are more focused on goals of personal and community empowerment (i.e., “the process through which people, and especially poorer people, are enabled to take more control over their own lives, and secure a better livelihood, with ownership of productive assets as one key element;” Chambers 1983:11). In this regard, this type of project tracks closely to the aims of “action research.” According to Ben Boog:

“action research is designed to improve the researched subjects’ capacities to solve problems, develop skills (including professional skills), increase their chances of self-determination, and to have more influence on the functioning and decision-making processes of organizations and institutions from the context in which they act;” it is “meant to be a double-sided process of research...directed at individual empowerment and collective empowerment” (Boog 2003: 426).

Such a project may not only be expected to more meaningfully involve and engage participants, but this type of project can also be expected to have a more multifaceted

conceptualization of expertise, especially compared to the expert-focused project type mentioned previously. Rather than elevating the status of outsiders, this type of project aimed to elevate the status of participants, and as such is more likely to draw on, amplify or otherwise emphasize their expertise. In this case, it would be outsiders that serve a more ancillary, support function. This shift in the understanding of expertise would presumably contribute to balancing power relations between outsiders and project participants.

In Thai Baan research, village members were considered to be not only the primary drivers of the project, but also the primary experts in the project, while IUCN and SEARIN acted as facilitators. IUCN provided resources for project staff, including one primary project officer in Sri Songkhram and several other project officers that monitored the progress of the project based in Bangkok and Vientiane. In addition to the project organizer in Sri Songkhram, IUCN also hired 4 project facilitators, all of whom were recent graduates of universities in the northeast of Thailand, were between 23 and 24 years of age, and were predominantly female. These facilitators were brought on the project as volunteers and after a time were paid a small salary. The staff were considered to perform a support and coordination function – they were not depicted as being primary researchers, but rather as people that were learning from the village researchers while doing tasks like note-taking and organizing meeting times (a ‘learner’ role that may have been reinforced by the youth of the facilitators). While the facilitators were also in charge of drafting the research results, the draft document was reviewed by village researchers to ensure that the document accurately reflected their findings.

The expertise of village researchers was particularly evident in a giant catfish recollection and mapping exercise that I observed. In this exercise village researchers mapped out where and when every giant catfish was caught in their vicinity for the last 20 years, including the weight in kilograms of each fish. While it was not possible to verify their data, it was a good indication of the presence and size of giant catfish in the area, and certainly was more information about the range and trends in giant catfish presence than could have been generated by a short-term study of an outside-expert. Village researchers also identified an additional 140 species of fish in the area, including both past and present fish populations.

As a result of this conception of expertise, it could be expected that power relations would be more equal in Thai Baan research than was the case in the catch monitoring project. While both projects involved outsiders that wrote up the data that had been provided by village members, which would seem to indicate strong similarities, the projects actually had opposite conceptions of who was considered to be the expert versus those that served the support function.

In another show of deference and respect, project staff and volunteers dedicated significant time to relationship-building and trust-building. This was accomplished, in part, through “non-research time activities,” such as having meals together, accepting local hospitalities and helping village members with their tasks. During the two months that I was in Sri Songkhram, the project facilitators and I spent approximately an equal amount of non-research time with village members as research time. For example, we would visit 2 of the closer villages for non-research time interaction often, mostly to share a meal and relax together in the evening. This non-research time meant that not every interaction between project facilitators and village members had to be serious and directed, and it allowed for strong personal relationships in addition to project-based relationships.

The Sri Songkhram project officer, in particular, emphasized the importance of building personal relationships, suggesting that “the local people want to see that you are not different so much from them -- if you can do it in the local style, and you can learn with them and become close with them, then you can learn about the real problem and the real situation and can train and develop a plan for the future.” Essentially, the quality of the personal relationships and the trust between project staff and participants had not only been a fulfilling process in itself, but it also



enhanced the project. It likely also helped even out power relations and build ownership and commitment of the village researchers to conduct community-based natural resource management.

A final, distinctive characteristic of Thai Baan research (as participant-driven, process-oriented research) was that it appeared to be relatively dynamic, and evolved and expanded to include additional activities based upon the ideas and requests of village members, including environmental education and entrepreneurial activities.

In regards to environmental education, some village members had expressed concerns that the new generation did not fully appreciate the importance of fish and the local ecology, and therefore researchers and project facilitators took efforts to start up more comprehensive environmental education in the area. This included hosting a Wetlands Festival in the early months of 2004, during which time environmental education for the youth was strongly promoted. For example, students were invited to display river-related artwork and to speak about why they valued the wetlands. In addition to informal environmental education, village members and Thai Baan Researchers were also hoping to promote more formal environmental education for youth in the school systems by linking 17 local primary schools and 2 local high schools with Thai Baan Research.

As an example of an entrepreneurial, livelihood improvement project, village members expressed interest in organizing a cooperative to support the production and sale of value-added products, especially fish-based products. During the time that I was in Sri Songkhram, one group, the Women's Group of Ban Pak Yam, had already begun efforts to create a cooperative to sell fermented fish, dry fish, fish cake, and fish jam (chili-spice and sweet) in collaboration with Thai Baan research.

These additional activities were valuable supplements to the original project, if for nothing else because they further exhibited the participant-driven nature of the research and the more equal power relations entailed in the research, since it proved to be more flexible to accommodate changing participant needs and wants.

### Summary

In this case study I examined two participatory research projects that at first glance appeared to share much in focus and method. Both featured local participation in collecting environmental data. However, my analysis shows that the less successful catch monitoring project, despite being participatory, was outsider-driven and focused on biological factors alone. It was not successful at empowering village members, nor was it able to fully address complex environmental problems related to myriad socio-political factors that impact resource use and availability. Moreover, the research design elevated the expertise of outside researchers rather than participants and exacerbated feelings of distrust when the researcher failed to return results in a timely manner. The failure of this project draws attention to potential red flags for projects that, even when involving local participation, are outsider-driven or data-focused.

In contrast, Thai Baan research was more participant-driven and process-oriented. It had an increased focus on social and environmental interactions, increased engagement of village members in the project goals and design, and it allowed room for an evolution of the project.

The more successful Thai Baan research provides some "lessons learned" about what made participatory processes meaningful in that site. First, it was essential that the participants (in this case, village members) were actively involved in the planning process and ultimately were the decision-makers about whether the project went forward or not. Not only was this important in the initiation of the project, but also in the evolution of the project, as it adapted to villager desires to incorporate more entrepreneurial activities and environmental education.

Second, it was helpful to refer to positive experiences elsewhere, including inviting village members and peers to talk about their experiences in exchange visits. The experiences of villagers from Pak Mun and Rasi Salai raised awareness for those in Sri Songkhram about points of vulnerability based on their experiences of resource degradation, but also highlighted the value of community organization in order to become their own champions. The newly forged connections served a valuable social function as well, as it linked Sri Songkhram village members into the larger community and social movement webs of fishermen that shared similar livelihoods and values yet were threatened by impacts from outside development.

Third, it was vitally important to pay attention to embedded power relations and conceptions of expertise. One useful indication of power relations in a project such as this is to ask the questions: “who is the expert?” and “who is supporting who?” It may raise a red flag if answers to these questions favor outsiders versus participants, while the reverse may signal a higher potential toward meaningful engagement and potential empowerment of local participants.

Finally, the project was made more meaningful by the project officers and facilitators’ dedicated attention toward building trust through spending non-research time together, building personal relationships, relating to local culture, and respecting villagers as people and as researchers. As others have shown that a lack of trust often leads to sentiments of ill will, acts of resistance or even project failure (Stern 2010) the additional time investment may have been particularly important in engaging village members and maintaining mutual commitment to the project.

I will now turn to a second case study to differentiate between state and local conceptions of meaningful consultation processes in Peru. Once again, the distinction between outsider-driven versus participant-driven processes and outcomes is a key factor in whether the participatory mechanisms are viewed as meaningful and legitimate, or whether they are seen as instrumental and should be rejected.

### **Case Study 2: Consultation in Peru**

One of the first acts of Peruvian President Ollanta Humala after he took office in 2011 was to pass a national Consultation Law (“Law of the Right to Prior Consultation for Indigenous and Native Peoples, recognized in Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization,” promulgated in September 2011). This law had been long demanded by social movement advocates, especially indigenous activists, in the country, and occurred within a context of high levels of indigenous-state conflicts over national development policies and resource claims. According to the Peruvian Ombudsman’s office, as of June 2010 there were 169 active social conflicts nationwide, of which approximately 56% had to do with tensions surrounding the “control, use and/or access to the environment and its resources,” and at least 75 of the conflicts had to do explicitly with concerns relating to mining and oil concessions (Defensoría del Pueblo 2010: 62). The hope by indigenous people and government officials alike was that by more meaningfully consulting and eliciting the participation of indigenous community members in decisions that affect their communities then there would be less social conflict surrounding environment and development projects and policies, and that they could come to outcomes that were seen as more equitable and just by all involved.<sup>2</sup>

However, even after this major piece of legislation was passed in order to enhance indigenous participatory mechanisms country-wide, indigenous people in Peru quickly came to question and critique the Consultation Law and its implementing legislation. In this case study, I

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., see <http://elcomercio.pe/politica/gobierno/giesecke-sobre-conflictos-sociales-este-gobierno-no-habra-muertos-noticia-1272809>

compare and contrast the text of the Law with the demands of indigenous activists in order to identify why the Law in its current form, despite enhancing indigenous participation in decision-making about legislative or administrative measures that affect them, has been critiqued as “unconstitutional” and “slippery.” I also draw attention to the indigenous proposals that have been made to ensure this participatory mechanism is both meaningful and legitimate.

I focus in particular on position statements by the Unity Pact (“*Pacto de Unidad*”), which was comprised of five major national indigenous and farmer’s (*campesino*) organizations: the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSESP; *la Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana*), the National Agrarian Confederation (CNA; *la Confederación Nacional Agraria*), the Farmers’ Confederation of Peru (CCP; *la Confederación Campesina del Perú*), the National Confederation of Peruvian Communities Affected by Mining (CONACAMI; *la Confederación Nacional de Comunidades del Perú Afectadas por la Minería*), and the National Organization of Indigenous Andean and Amazonian Women of Peru (ONAMIAP; *la Organización Nacional de Mujeres Indígenas Andinas y Amazónicas del Perú*), which were in turn joined by a sixth national indigenous organization in 2011 during the formalized discussions to analyze the Consultation Law (the Confederation of Amazonian Nationalities of Peru - CONAP; *la Confederación de Nacionalidades Amazónicas del Perú*).

Far from being a subset of elites, these organizations represent a vast number of indigenous communities throughout the nation. As an example, AIDSESP (the Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon) is a national indigenous organization (federation) that supports 9 regional federations, which in turn consists of 65 locally-based federations, representing over 1800 indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> The other members of the Unity Pact are also all national organizations that similarly support regional federations that in turn support large bases of local communities.

The Unity Pact had been active for several years prior to the 2011 passage of the Consultation Law, and were a major force in lobbying for the Law. After the passage of the law, they continued to serve as a semi-autonomous coordinating body that had its own advisors and released position statements on behalf of the member organizations. Furthermore, given the importance of the Unity Pact in the eventual promulgation of the law and in speaking for indigenous and *campesino* communities nation-wide, the member organizations were invited by government officials to join a Multi-Sectorial Commission, which had the objective of, in essence, consulting the Consultation Law and eliciting indigenous and government comments on the implementing regulations for the law. This multi-ministerial Commission was presided by the Prime Ministers’ Office and the Vice-Minister of Interculturality (of the Ministry of Culture) and included the participation of an additional 17 Vice-Ministries (in addition to the indigenous representative organizations).

Members of the Unity Pact, despite having lobbied for a Consultation Law, quickly came to question the limitations of the Law, and in November 2011 they released an important position statement detailing their “non-negotiable minimum principles for the application of the rights to participation, prior consultation, and free, prior and informed consent.” These “minimum principles” were intended to “guide the elaboration, interpretation, and application of the rights of indigenous peoples,” drawing “our intrinsic rights and our vision of development,” as well as national and international law. The statement included copious references to international law, especially ILO Convention 169, as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and jurisprudence from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (especially the case of the Saramaka People v. Suriname).

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.aidesep.org.pe/quienes-somos/>

Indigenous concerns with the Law were further discussed in subsequent indigenous gatherings to assess the law and the draft regulations, including 6 “macro-regional” events held in January 2012 (in regional hubs of Chiclayo, Pucallpa, Iquitos, Cusco, Bagua, and Huancayo), which served as gathering grounds for the base communities of each of the 6 national organizations in the given regions to discuss the Law and draft regulations. Each regional training provided a series of pronouncements and recommendations, which were then compared and consolidated in a “national encounter” held in February 2012. Together, these position statements draw attention to numerous divergences between indigenous peoples’ demands regarding the right to consultation and the state’s proposal for implementing consultation processes. In the following sections I highlight 3 key divergences and demands related to 1) final decision and consent; 2) who is consulted; and 3) what is consulted.

### Consultation versus Consent

The primary concern that indigenous leaders had with the Consultation Law had to do with Article 15, which states that the “final decision of the legislative or administrative measure corresponds to the [state] entity promoting [the measure].” Indigenous leaders raised immediate and ardent concerns that by leaving the final decision to the state entity that unwanted projects would continue to be imposed on indigenous communities without their approval or consent.

Just a week after the promulgation of the law, indigenous leader Alfonso Lopez spelled out the importance of this article in an interview with the media outlet *Alerta Peru*:

This signifies that if a community is not in agreement for a company to conduct an extractive activity in their territory, the state has to decide, and if the state decides that these resources are in the national interest then they can expropriate this territory, they can impose in the territory of this community an extractive company... They have always violated our territories and done what they wanted. Now we want to say that they [must] respect the right that we have to our ancestral territory.

More concretely, the Unity Pact detailed a range of situations (7 total) in which the state should be required to obtain indigenous peoples’ consent in order to approve a measure. These included “any decision that could affect, modify, reduce, or extinguish indigenous rights to property” and “megaprojects, or investment and development plans that could affect subsistence conditions.” The Unity Pact also identified an additional 8 situations in which the state “should desist” from a measure, such as any measure that “could affect the conditions of subsistence, such as water sources or food security.” The demands for prior informed consent were reiterated in the six macro-regional events and the national encounter.

Despite the forceful and repeated demands for prior informed consent, government officials were unwilling to budge on the article that was included in both the consultation law and the regulations that retained the state’s right to make the “final decision.” Moreover, instead of addressing indigenous demands for prior informed consent, government officials amended the final text of the regulations for the law to state that “the result of the consultation process is *not binding* (emphasis added),” with the Minister of Culture clarifying in a press conference about the law that “the consultation is binding in the sense that it should be carried out – the result of the consultation is not necessarily binding.”

Indigenous leaders were outraged that their calls for prior informed consent, which were backed by international law and international legal experts, were by and large side-lined and denied, asking what the ultimate value was of “non-binding consultations.”

This debate pointed to important divergences between government officials and indigenous leaders regarding expectations of what constituted meaningful participation and consultation. A

predominant position among those in the Peruvian government is that carrying out the consultations would already indicate that they were respecting indigenous rights. Consultation, in essence, was seen as a procedural right, in which completing the process of consultations was sufficient to demonstrate that indigenous peoples were being actively involved in decisions being taken that would affect them.

For indigenous leaders, completing the process of consultation was only important insofar as it helped ensure the respect of substantive rights, such as the rights to territory and self-determination – namely, consultation was necessary but not sufficient to ensure that indigenous rights were respected. This indicated that consultations would be of limited value if they could be carried out, yet nonetheless allowed for the violation of substantive indigenous rights.

Much like the Thai case examined earlier, it mattered greatly whether a process was outsider-driven versus locally-driven, with indigenous leaders declaring the consultations as outsider-driven and catered to state interests. However, in contrast to the Thai case study, in this case an over emphasis on process over outcome constituted a risk since it could facilitate ornamental state actions to involve local participation even while steamrolling policies that indigenous communities opposed.

### Who is Consulted?

In addition to the above concerns about having limited sway in the final decisions being taken about measures or projects that affect them, indigenous leaders raised a number of other concerns with the Consultation Law, such as the fact that it was the government that set the criteria for considering who would be consulted, and indeed who would be considered indigenous.

First of all, Article 2 of the Law states that only measures that “directly affect” their collective rights will be consulted. However, indigenous leaders were concerned that the definition of “direct impacts” utilized by the state entities would be overly narrow compared to the definitions that they might use.

For example, with extractive industries, communities that were generally considered to be “directly affected” by the state were those that were located immediately within or adjacent to zones of operation, which might only be a few communities out of the watershed or ethnic group. Yet, indigenous leaders pointed out that actual or potential contamination from a project like oil extraction affects the entire watershed and therefore it was important that the so-called “indirectly affected” people and communities also be consulted about the activity. Indigenous peoples pushed to revise the law and regulations (e.g., to drop the word “direct” so that consultations would be carried out for any affected communities) so that consultations be carried out for all affected communities.

At a more fundamental level, even who was considered indigenous (and therefore consulted) relied on government determined decisions and criteria (e.g., as addressed in Articles 7 and 20 of the law), which again sparked concerns that there would be overly narrow decisions about who would be consulted. This was of particular concern to *campesino* communities from the Andes, who were worried that they would be excluded from consultations. These fears were warranted, and came to a head in May 2013 (over a year and a half after the passage of the Consultation Law), when heated debates among government Ministers over the inclusion (or not) of Quechua-speakers (*Quechua-hablantes*) in consultation processes led to the resignation of the Vice-Minister of Interculturality. The Minister of Energy and Mines reportedly took the lead in pressuring the President and other ministers to exclude Quechua-speakers from consultations, as part of a push to accelerate mining

investments in the country (or put another way, to ensure that exploration and extraction projects were not slowed down due to what he considered unwarranted consultations).<sup>4</sup>

While the policy change to exclude Quechua-speakers from consultations was not implemented, the high-level debates over this possibility capture some of the key indigenous concerns with the consultation law and identity politics in Peru. A major flaw of the law, as identified by many indigenous leaders, is that even the definition of who is and is not indigenous, and how they should be consulted, is left to non-indigenous government officials, giving disproportionate weight to their criteria, interests, and world-views. In line with academic critiques of outsider-driven participatory processes examined earlier, the over-reliance on outsider's objectives, knowledges, and forms of expertise led to distrust and ill will by indigenous leaders toward government officials and the Consultation Law alike.

Rather than relying on state officials, like those from the National Institute for the Development of Andean, Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian People (INDEPA), to develop criteria to identify indigenous peoples, which would then be codified in an official database of indigenous people (*Base de Datos Oficial de Pueblos Indígenas u Originarios*), there was instead a dual push for forefronting self-identification in order to identify indigenous peoples and to establish a national indigenous institution that was constituted and led by indigenous representatives.

### What is Consulted and When?

Two final concerns of indigenous peoples with the law and the draft regulations had to do with what was consulted and when. Indigenous leaders frequently referenced the issue of extractive industries as a litmus test for the validity of consultation. By the late 2000s, over 70% of the Peruvian Amazon had been superimposed by oil exploration and extraction concessions (up from around 7% in 2003; Finer and Orta Martínez 2010), and substantial portions of the Andes were similarly superimposed with mining concessions (e.g., see Bebbington and Bury 2009). These extractive industry concessions also represented only one type of concession – indigenous territories were also affected by a range of other private industries, such as forestry concessions and the expansion of industrial agriculture, including for biofuels. The Consultation Law, meanwhile, only required consultations for measures that were passed from that point forward. Given the continuing impacts from these measures on indigenous communities, many of which were initiated after ILO Convention 169 (the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention) came into force in Peru (in 1995), indigenous leaders demanded the reconsideration of such measures that had not been previously consulted, rather than only applying consultations to completely new projects or measures.

This issue was also identified as a key weakness of the Consultation Law even by policy experts within the Peruvian government. For example, in a February 2012 interview a legal advisor to the Ministry of Culture expressed that the primary problem with consultation when it comes to extractive industries is that they are “all concessioned out already,” with hardly any room for additional concessions, and consultations would only be held before new concessions. He seemed to indicate that this issue (*problemática*) more than any other would limit the reach and legitimacy of the law.

Moreover, even if new projects, such as those related to extractive industries, were consulted, indigenous leaders were concerned that consultations would only occur after the contracts were signed but prior to the initiation of activities. Once again, this concern was valid,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://noticias.terra.com.pe/nacional/peru-busca-acelerar-inversion-minera-con-cambio-de-ley-de-consulta-comunidades,1fb2221da0dce310VgnCLD2000000ec6eb0aRCRD.html>;  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/01/latinoamerica-mineria-peru-idLTASIE94000220130501>  
<http://www.larepublica.pe/politica/editorial-07-05-2013>

since contracts that are signed between the state and private companies for activities like oil and mineral exploration and extraction often include protections for the investors, which could make it harder for the state to withdraw from the contract if communities were opposed to the activities. The very act of signing the contracts and making the concessions also indicates a state prioritization of those types of projects and measures, which again signals that there might be less of a possibility to stop projects, but rather, at best, to slightly alter the terms of the projects for things like benefit sharing.

Indigenous leaders thus demanded that consultations be carried out before projects or concessions were made, rather than simply before the operations were initiated, as was stated in the law. More specifically, they demanded that “consultations should be held before, during and after the promotion of legislative and administrative measures,” emphasizing not only the character of prior informed consent, but the iterative nature of consultations (which would counter the potential to treat consultations as a one-off check-mark requirement).

### Summary

While at first glance the passage of a national Consultation Law appeared like a huge victory for the indigenous movement, indigenous leaders nationwide quickly came to denounce the Law, demanding key revisions to the Consultation Law and its regulations. These critiques followed in line with longer standing critiques of participatory mechanisms in Peru. For example, prior to the passage of the national Consultation Law in Peru, Fabiana Li commented that “in communities affected by mining activity in Peru, people often feel that the very processes that elicit their participation actually disempower and exclude them” (Li 2009, 230). Unfortunately, the Consultation Law and regulations as they currently stand may similarly prove to be disempowering rather than empowering, and may even come to be envisioned as tyrannical or a neocolonial version of participation, in line with academic critiques cited at the beginning of this policy brief.

The Unity Pact made their dissatisfaction with the Law crystal clear in a March 2012 pronouncement that declared that the Consultation Law and its regulations were “unconstitutional” and “violate substantive rights recognized in ILO Convention 169 and international law” and as such “transforms them into a principal operator of the interests for neo-extractive economic policies of the current government and transnational business sector.” In a September 2012 press conference about the Peruvian governments’ compliance with ILO 169, the president of the national indigenous federation known as AIDSEP [Inter-Ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon] similarly described the law as having been “converted into an instrument to benefit the corporations and leave to the side the interests of the indigenous peoples of this country.”<sup>5</sup>

I identified three sets of key indigenous critiques of the Consultation Law and its associated regulations. First, indigenous leaders questioned the value and validity of “non-binding” consultations, instead demanding that the state recognize indigenous rights to give or withhold consent for measures that affect their property, subsistence, lifeways (*formas de vida*), or physical and cultural integrity. Second, they critiqued the state’s monopoly on determining who would be consulted, given the potential for overly narrow criteria of who would be considered as “directly affected” or even as indigenous. Third, they critiqued the post-facto nature of consultations (despite being termed ‘prior consultation’) – i.e., only after measures had been promoted and with little to no recourse for the countless measures passed prior to 2012.

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<sup>5</sup> “Luego del reglamento, que fue aprobado sin el consentimiento de las organizaciones indígenas, la ley se ha convertido en un instrumento en beneficio de las empresas y deja de lado el interés de los pueblos originarios de este país.” [http://elcomercio.pe/peru/lima/aidesep-dice-que-ejecutivo-no-avanza-ley-consulta\\_1-noticia-1469440](http://elcomercio.pe/peru/lima/aidesep-dice-que-ejecutivo-no-avanza-ley-consulta_1-noticia-1469440)

These critiques all speak to red flags that may be associated with participatory mechanisms, in which participation is elicited but does not have the ability to shape or change the outcome, overly narrow criteria are used to who participates and how, and participation is only invited at a later stage after a project has already been approved and planned out. Indigenous demands, on the other hand, articulate what would need to be done in order to ensure that participatory mechanisms are, in fact, meaningful – namely that they are able to more clearly set the terms of who participates, when, and to what ends (i.e., their participation can shape or change the outcome).

## **Conclusion**

Indigenous critiques in both the Peru and Thai case studies draw attention to wide divergences that may exist between participatory processes that at the outset might look similar. While the catch monitoring project in the Thai case or the Peruvian state's version of "prior informed consultation" were undeniably 'participatory,' they both fell prey to many critiques identified by scholars throughout this policy brief (e.g., Brosius, Tsing and Zerner 1998, Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003, Brown 2002) – with processes initiated by outsiders, that failed to meaningfully engage local people in decision-making, and evoked frustration or dissatisfaction rather than a sense of partnership or mutual-benefit.

In order to promote more meaningful participatory mechanisms in the Pacific Basin and elsewhere, it is important to avoid common red flags with participatory mechanisms, such as symbolic or instrumental local participation in processes that are designed and implemented by outsiders in order to meet outsider-determined goals or ends. There must be great attention paid to unequal power relations, such as if only one party is considered the expert, criteria-setter, or final decision maker. Finally, there needs to be more attention paid to the participants' own visions and self-determination for conservation and development.



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