

## CASE STUDY

Chiang Rai province, Thailand

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# Sustainable forest management ties indigenous group together against eviction threats

In order to oppose logging activities in their territories (ongoing since 1968) and an attempt of eviction by the State (in 1992), the indigenous people of Huay Hin Lad Nai village, Northern Thailand, have established traditional forest management techniques and institutions, set up the Northern Farmer's Network (NFN), and adopted a sustainable land and forest use planning system. These different actions have built cohesion in the community and helped resist logging and evictions.

### PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Northern Farmer's Network (NFN), Northern Development Foundation (NDF), Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (NIPT), and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

### LOCATION

Huay Hin Lad Nai village, Wieng Pa Pao district, Chiang Rai province, Thailand

### TIMELINE

1992 - present

### TARGET AUDIENCE

Indigenous communities, land and forest management specialists, policymakers

### KEYWORDS

Karen peoples, logging, traditional cultivation, intergenerational knowledge transfer

## GOOD PRACTICES

Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at [www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do](http://www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do)

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

- Commitment 3** Recognize and protect the diverse tenure and production systems upon which people's livelihoods depend
- Commitment 4** Ensure gender justice in relation to land respect and protect the inherent land and territorial rights of indigenous peoples
- Commitment 6** Enable the role of local land users in territorial and ecosystem management

# Case description

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## Background issues

### General context

The Karen people are indigenous to Myanmar and Thailand. In Thailand, they are currently around 400,000. Their lives, livelihoods and culture are deeply rooted into the forest. However, recently forest-based livelihoods have declined significantly. Starting in the 1980s, national parks and other protected areas have been established by the Thai government to promote sustainable forest management, yet illegal logging and timber trading have been enabled by state officials. This has affected Karen communities living in the protected areas and contributed to the loss of livelihoods. Logging has led to natural resource degradation, taking the sources of sustenance and places of cultural significance away from Karen communities. In northern Thailand, state forest regulations, including a ban on shifting cultivation in many areas designated as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, have led to a dramatic reduction of traditional Karen rotational cultivation practices. Many Karen communities also experienced forced eviction and relocation imposed by the Thai government.

### Local context

Huay Hin Lad Nai is a hilly Karen village with 20 households nestled between the National Forest Reservation Area and the Khun Jae National Park. Karen people settled here in 1966.

In 1968, the Thai Government gave permission to the Chiang Rai Tha Mai logging company to operate in the village area. The logging company destroyed sacred forest areas, water sources, and the community cemetery, which is believed to be the dwelling place of ancestral spirits. The destruction of forests also resulted in the decrease in the number of wild animals and in flooding. Eventually, the Thai government annulled the forest concession in 1984, after linking the ongoing deforestation with the flooding in Southern Thailand.

In 1992, the Thai Government declared Khun Jae National Park a protected area and ordered the community to move out from Park's territory. The order to move out from their own lands was seen as a looming threat towards Karen people's culture, traditional knowledge, food security, sustainable forest management, and ultimately well-being of present and future generations.

### **Problems to be addressed**

The Huay Hin Lad Nai villagers were not prepared to face this threat. They did not have the appropriate structures and institutions in place to protect their community's land and livelihoods.

The Thai government did not recognize the Karen community's land rights, allowing large-scale logging in the area, designating indigenous communities' land as a protected area, and eventually delivering an eviction notice to these people.

### **Solution**

To combat these negative impacts, the Huay Hin Lad Nai villagers adopted a sustainable land and forest use planning system, which served to organize the community in resisting logging and evictions. In the process, they collaborated with neighboring communities facing similar problems and formed the Northern Farmer's Network (NFN). The NFN has been actively fighting for the land rights of hill tribes and local farmers. They joined the National Assembly of the Poor to further advance their struggle for the recognition of their land rights. This empowered them to engage with the Thai government more effectively.

The Karen community of Huay Hin Lad Nai also formulated their rules and regulations to restore the forest and natural resources, which they manage sustainably with the participation of women and youth. Furthermore, the villagers revived their traditional practices and culture as Karen people and strengthened the transfer of relevant knowledge to the younger generations. This improved their capacity to resist logging and evictions.

### **Activities**

Indigenous Karen, Lisu and Hmong communities from Chom Thong, Chiang Dao, Wieng Pa Pao, and Mae Wang districts convened and started fighting for land rights together. The NFN was the result of the communities' struggle against the eviction order from their lands. The NFN was established in 1994 with the following objectives: (i) to promote and support the community on natural resources management and conservation; (ii) to

carry out advocacy work for the state to recognize the community's land rights; and (iii) to promote and support a model of sustainable agriculture by using the community's traditional knowledge and rotational farming.

Preecha Siri, a community leader, was key in the indigenous communities' struggle for land rights. He played an advisory role in the NFN. To make the communities' voices and demands heard, he and other community leaders actively participated in a series of actions and protests in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, including in the national Assembly of the Poor that was organized in 1996. Alliances were also formulated with other communities at the sub-district level. Under Mr. Siri's leadership, the Huay Hin Lad Nai community was able to devise innovative income generation plans for sustaining their struggles and for implementing their forest and livelihood diversification management plans.

The community also collaborated with other organizations, such as the Northern Development Foundation (NDF). NDF, together with the Huay Hin Lad Nai community, conducted research showing that indigenous peoples' sustainable natural resource management systems, particularly rotational farming, sequesters more carbon dioxide than it emits and is key to the food security of the community.

In 2003, the village was officially recognized as Huay Hin Lad Nai under Weing Pa Pao town of Chiang Rai province. Afterwards, the community agreed to establish a set of regulations and norms on the sustainable extraction of resources for the community's use.

## Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

This case study is a good example of people-centred land governance. First of all, it highlights the importance of unity towards a common goal. In order to respond to the threats of eviction and make their struggle stronger and strategic, community members organized themselves and established alliances with other communities and networks. As a result, the entire struggle for land rights was solely driven by and for the community. The active participation of community members for their rights and well-being eventually facilitated them to get back their lands. After the successful struggle for their lands, community members, particularly women and youth, continue to be integral parts of the sustainable resource management system, livelihoods, and intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and practices.

Secondly, this is a story of people's struggle to recognize their right to live with dignity and in line with their identity. This struggle contributed to the recognition of Karen people's sustainable practices in natural resource management from the Thai government and, more generally, raised awareness on indigenous peoples' issues at the global level.

# Changes

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“Forests are the source of culture and livelihoods of indigenous peoples. They are our identities.” - Preecha Siri, community leader and Forest Heroes awardee at the 2013 UN Forum on Forests

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## Baseline

Prior to the formation of the NFN, the villagers did not have any previous collaboration with other organizations. They also lived off the forest, with hunting and traditional farming as their main sources of food. Furthermore, the government of Thailand claimed that the lands belong to the state, so the land rights of Hin Lad Nai villagers were not recognised.

## Achievements

Currently, the villagers of Huay Hin Lad Nai occupy an area of 3688 hectares. This includes their settlement area, shifting cultivation area, and part of their forest. After adopting their natural resource management practices, the villagers developed a 6-tier land use pattern. They manage land sustainably for their food security, income generation, and traditional cultural practices. Catchment forest is located on the hilltop, followed at a lower altitude by rotational agricultural land, and then corn fields, a tea garden, the settlement area, and finally a wet terrace field. Under the present land use pattern 85% of the land (3,119 hectares) is occupied by forest cover. Only 1% falls under rotational farming/shifting cultivation, which guarantees Karen people's food security throughout the year. They have established and maintain 19 kilometres of fire break lines to avoid forest fires. Wild tea, honey, and bamboo among others provide income to community members. One of the community regulations requires community members to set aside a certain amount of their income from collecting and selling products as contribution to the community fund for community forest management. They set up their forest committees and started collecting one Thai Baht per month from each community member for awareness-raising on community land rights, territorial mapping, and sustainable land use. The Huay Hin Lad Nai natural resource management practice is becoming an example for others who want to improve knowledge and skills in the sustainable management of forest resources. The village receives many researchers and visitors, as the community is considered a model for environmental sustainability and self-sufficiency.

The community also promotes the transfer of traditional knowledge and practices from elders to young people by developing curricula for the youth, which include the Karen language, traditional clothing, the art of sword dancing and bamboo handicraft. The indigenous education system includes various teaching methods, such as traditional storytelling with practical activities in the field and hands-on learning. As a result, the Huay Hin Lad Nai village has succeeded in keeping 99% of the youth in the village, and they are now its main force in the management of the village's natural resources and income generation activities.

Currently, the community is in the process of getting their collective land rights recognized by the State. Under the Prime Minister Abhijit Vejjajiva, a government project on community land titling was launched. This project intended to identify and support communities in the mapping and recognition of their lands. This project lasted for one year and then stopped due to the change of government.

## Evidence

To corroborate that indigenous peoples' traditional practices have positive impacts on the environment, villagers collaborated with external agencies and the University of Chiang Mai and the following publication was finalised - *Climate Change, Trees and Livelihood: A Case Study on the Carbon Footprint of a Karen Community in Northern Thailand* (Northern Development Foundation, 2012). The research findings have validated that the traditional shifting cultivation of indigenous peoples is sustainable, contributes to biodiversity enhancement, sequesters more greenhouse gases than it emits, and at the same time, ensures food security and sustains the community's livelihood.

In recognition of his contributions, Preecha Siri, community leader and NFN advisor, received a Forest Heroes award during the United Nations Forum on Forests in 2013.

# Lessons learned

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## Lessons for civil society

Civil society can follow the example of the Hid Lan Nai community's unity and shared commitment towards the common goal of protecting their land and resources for their survival and that of future generations.

Networking for wider support with other communities with similar experiences is also very important in advancing these struggles. It is important to identify the existing networks, alliances, and organizations that can add weight to the ongoing campaign.

It is also very important to actively promote the intergenerational transfer of indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices from the elder to the younger generations and to engage youth and women in sustainable natural resource management practices.

## Lessons for policy makers

Policy makers must fundamentally recognise the intimate connection between environmental, social, spiritual and cultural practices as key for sustainability.

Policy makers must also recognise community-centered models of governance over land and natural resources; acknowledge the effectiveness of community-initiated practices on sustainable resource management, including traditional methods and practices of

land and forest use and management; protect, promote, and fulfil the collective rights of indigenous peoples over their land and natural resources.

Lobbying for policies to be in line with international standards such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) has to start from the community. Their involvement is very important in substantiating indigenous peoples' rights with concrete practices supporting their roles and contributions to natural resource management and sustainable development.

## Challenges

The leaders faced many threats from the national park authorities, but their strong community mobilisation and networking strengthened their resolve to continue the assertion of rights to their land and resources.

## Follow-up

The Huay Hin Lad Nai community is considered as a model village by the Thai government. The village has become the centre of learning about community members' low carbon and environmentally sustainable ways of life and therefore receives many visitors from around the world. In this regard, the village offers much that people can potentially replicate in other parts of Thailand or outside.

# Supporting material

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## References and further reading

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