Between Subsistence and Market: Livelihood Choices of Karen Uplanders in Northwest Thailand

Runako (Luna) von Luebke

PhD Thesis Abstract

Against the backdrop of diminishing natural resources, increasing population, and rising agricultural commercialisation, how do Karen uplanders in northwest Thailand sustain their livelihoods? In particular, how do Karen villagers combine subsistence-based and market-oriented livelihood choices given these changing conditions? These questions, which are at the core of this study, extend to a wider discussion in recent debates about development. Echoing the substantivist-formalist debates of the 1960s and 1970s, recent discussions on Karen livelihood in Thailand have revived a cultural-economic divide: while some scholars prioritize subsistence-based agriculture as a means for preserving socio-cultural values and strengthening Karen political rights, others emphasise the constraints of subsistence farming and advocate the opportunities of market-oriented methods.

In this dissertation I argue that upland economies cannot be understood by applying either of these two positions in isolation. Instead of further dichotomising Karen livelihood choices, it seems more important to analyse the actual circumstances under which Karen uplanders choose their livelihood strategies. Based on empirical evidence from in-depth observations, interviews and household-surveys, I demonstrate that Karen livelihood choices arise from a complex interplay of constraints and opportunities. The field results from a typical subsistence-oriented village (Mae Chang) show that a majority of dry-rice swiddeners face rice insufficiency and, over time, have expanded their activities towards intensified and market-oriented livelihood options. However, this shift towards wet-rice intensification, cash crop diversification, and wage labour engagement — which is examined in Mae Chang and four other case-study villages — is not a unilinear process.

The way in which Karen uplanders combine subsistence-oriented methods with market-oriented means varies significantly between and within research sites. Livelihood decisions depend on both
location-specific (land availability and market access) and household-specific factors (individual income and education levels). In many villages, rising engagements in commercial trade and labour activities coexist with sustained swidden practices, based on local knowledge and inherited farming traditions. Especially for marginalised uplanders — with low financial, educational and infrastructural resources — swidden farming provides an important foundation. It is a basic safety layer which is complemented by intensified agriculture and labour activities. In light of these findings, this study proposes a synthesis of subsistence and market-oriented perspectives. It contends that a well-balanced mix of traditional and commercial options is the most promising pathway for sustaining Karen livelihoods.