

Trapped in the corporate agri-food system: resource grabbing and political-economic constraints in Thailand

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1) Introduction

Studying problems of the agricultural and food sector is important because it provides clear examples of why the capitalist system is socially and ecologically unsustainable. Agriculture is an activity which provides a direct link between humans and nature, not to mention that around 2.6 billion people on Earth still rely on agriculture for their livelihood.¹ Food is also undeniably a basic need for humans, and is a topic that concerns everyone. Finding ways to build alternative systems to deliver safe food through sustainable production methods could be starting points for resisting and/or reforming the capitalist system. With the growing health, ecological, and social concerns, agriculture and food have become one of the key topics that bring people of different classes and backgrounds together to search for alternatives, such as green market networks. This paper contributes to such an important issue by exploring the problems of the agriculture and food system in Thailand, under the contexts of capitalist accumulation and political-economic-ideological power relations within Thailand. There are not many agrarian political economic analyses on Southeast Asian countries, and a case study of Thailand should provide an interesting example of agrarian social movements under particular cultural and political-economic settings.

In the next section, linkages between the current economic-ecological crisis, resource grabbing and the corporate agri-food system are discussed. This paper uses the term "corporate agri-food system" to describe the mainstream domination by capitalist interests and industrial production methods in the current production, distribution and consumption system of agricultural food products. The third section discusses Alternative Agriculture and land reform movements in Thailand. The fourth section discusses co-optations by political-economic elites, which add to the difficulty of strengthening these social movements. In particular, it focuses on how political-economic elites currently in power co-opt pro-poor rhetoric and implement agricultural and rural populist policies, which reinforce patron-client relations and mask structural problems in the capitalist system.

2) Corporate agri-food system in Thailand

Ecology, capital accumulation, resource grabbing and monopoly power

There are many studies which point to the ecological unsustainability of capitalist agriculture, and suggest that there is a need to move towards sustainable agriculture based on agro-ecological principles.² The capitalist and Green Revolution production methods, with

¹ HR Herren et al., *UNEP Green Economy Report: Agriculture* (Geneva: UNEP, 2001), 36.

² Many authors have discussed these issues e.g. Tony Weis, "The Accelerating Biophysical Contradictions of Industrial Capitalist Agriculture" 10, no. 3 (2010): 315–341.; Miguel A Altieri, "Agroecology: The Science of Natural Resource Management for Poor Farmers in Marginal Environments Agriculture," *Ecosystems & Environment* 93, no. 1–3 (2012): 1–24.

emphasis on mono-cropping and reducing products from nature to mere commodities, involves extensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, hybrid or genetically modified seeds, and advanced technologies that are not only expensive to small-scale farmers, but also fossil-fuel dependent and potentially ecologically destructive. In Thailand, the Green Revolution has caused soil degradation and the reduction of biodiversity (such as loss of traditional rice, fish and plants genes), toxins in soil, water and food, as well as many new plant diseases, which all have negative impacts on local food security.³ Many research suggest that small-scale farmers are stuck in growing vicious cycles of debts, because the prices of agricultural inputs are high while the prices they receive for their products barely cover the costs, not to mention that agricultural yields continue to decline due to prolonged uses of chemical inputs.⁴ To repay debts, there may be increased chances of farmers selling off their land.

To make matters worse, the conjunction of food, energy and global economic crisis has prompted international capital markets to engage in speculative ventures in land, food and bio-fuels as investment in agriculture appears to present one solution to the profitability crisis of capital. There is increased phenomenon of land grabbing, which usually refers to large-scale land acquisitions in developing countries especially following the 2007-2008 world food price crisis. Land grabbing to secure bio-fuels and/or biomass raw materials, for example, is seen as leading the way towards a new round of accumulation or the "new bioeconomy".⁵ To keep the prices of circulating capital or raw materials down, capital strives to plunder "uncapitalised" nature by geographically expanding the frontiers of appropriation such as through different channels of accumulation by dispossession.⁶ Excess speculation by non-commodity traders are also seen as contributing to volatile, rising food prices.⁷

In Thailand, the problems of land grabbing for speculation and other investment purposes are not new. However, the current accumulation crisis may have accelerated resource grabbing, which may then exacerbate the problems of the current agri-food system. For example, land grabbing for large-scale plantations could imply more intensive use of chemical pesticides for mono-cropping, loss of genetic diversity, the diversion of food crops to bio-fuel industries, and also the dispossession of small-scale farmers who might then become economically and socially vulnerable low-skilled workers.

Since the late 1980s, there have been constant and visible conflicts between the state's control over forest areas and local usage of land, and the mass purchases of land all over the country by capitalists, who often leave the land unutilised.⁸ A study in 2000 found that about 10% of the total population owned more than 100 rai (1 rai = 1,600 square meters and 1 acre = 2.471 rai) of land, while around 90% hold 1 rai of land or less. Over 20 million rai of

³ Witoon Lienchamroon and Suriyon Thankitchanukit, *From the Green Revolution to Bio-engineering. Lessons for the Future of Thai Agriculture*. (Bangkok: BioThai, 2008), 156. (in Thai)

⁴ A comprehensive study of such problems include Pattama Sittichai et al., *A Complete Report on the Project to Compile and Analyse the Problems of Farmers and Sustainable Development* (Bangkok: National Economics and Social Development Board (NESDB), 2002). (in Thai).

⁵ Philip McMichael, "The Food Regime in the Land Grab : Articulating ' Global Ecology ' and the 'Political Economy'," Paper Presented at the International Conference on Global Land Grabbin, 6-8 April, (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex 1, 2011), 3 and 7-8.

⁶ Jason W. Moore, "Transcending the metabolic rift: a theory of crises in the capitalist world-ecology," *Journal of Peasant Studies*. Vol. 28, No. 1, Jan. 2011, 21-23.

⁷ Jennifer Clapp, "Food Price Volatility and Vulnerability in the Global South: considering the global economic context," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 6 (September 2009): 1186.

⁸ Sittichai et al., *op cit*, 69-71.

farmlands was left unutilised,⁹ while landless farmers and farmers who had insufficient land for farming were estimated to number around 6.7 million (1.5 million households) in 2003.¹⁰ Unlike Latin America, there are not many large-scale plantations but in recent years, there are reports of an increased level of large-scale purchases of agricultural land, such as in Ayuthya Province - an important agricultural area.¹¹ Reliable statistics on land grabbing are difficult to find, especially as land purchases can be made through nominees. In 2012, the office of the Ombudsman Thailand has suggested that despite the law passed in 1999 which regulates the purchase of land by foreigners, there are still small and large-scale land purchases through the use of nominees (such as corporations registered in Thailand). A rough approximation (perhaps an overestimation) suggests that foreign ownership of land in Thailand can be as high as a third of total cultivated land in the country (100 million rai out of 320 rai).¹²

The Water and Flood Management Commission (WFMC) under the current Yingluck government has declared a 350,000 million baht plan for a comprehensive national water management project, which include building dams/reservoir in major rivers, developing land use plans for areas near the Chao-Phraya river and 17 other river areas, developing irrigated agricultural land above Nakhon Sawan and Ayuthya provinces, building water floodways, and various other plans. Preliminary selections of contracting companies include 6 corporate groups such as the Korea water resource corporations. Out of a total of 31 sub-companies, 19 of them are Thai.¹³ Many NGOs and people's networks, such as in the North and Northeastern part of the country, have made statements against what they see as an untransparent and wasteful project aimed to establish monopoly/centralisation of control over water resource. They have quoted studies by many institutions against the building of large scale dams in certain parts of the country. For example, an economics study by Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) of dams to be built on Yom river in Prae province found that it will not be cost effective, while another study commissioned by the Thailand Research Funds suggests the dams to have negative impact on the forest, ecological system and community in nearby areas.¹⁴

The building of large-scale dams, and monopoly control of water resource in general, are likely to have destructive impact on the ecological system and local population, and might worsen the competition over water for agricultural and other purposes. Mr. Suwit Kulapwong, secretary of NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (Northeast) expressed concerns over the state monopoly of the water supply, which is likely to prioritise

⁹ Pricha Watanyoo, *Land Economic Policy of Thailand in the New Century*, (Bangkok: Land Development Department, 2001), quoted in Land Reform Network, *Alliance of People's Groups: Grass-roots politics*, (Bangkok: Land reform network, 2003), 10. (in Thai)

¹⁰ Prapas Pintoatong, Supa Yaimuang, and Banchorn Kaewsong, *The Possibility of Developing the Welfare system for the poor and the disadvantaged: the case of farmers*, (Bangkok: Edison press, 2003), 32. (in Thai)

¹¹ Matichon Newspaper, "Village leader tells of capitalist land grabbing of rice fields", April 4, 2012, 12. (in Thai)

¹² Krungthep Turakij (Bangkok Business Newspaper), "Foreign land grabbing 100 million rai", January 24, 2012, 13-14. (in Thai). There are other studies on nominees such as by Siripon Sajjanunt, *Project to Study the Problem of Foreign Ownership of Assets in Thailand Phase 1-2* (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2009). (in Thai)

¹³ Khaosod newspaper, "Six Groups Compete for 3.5 Hundred Million Baht Water Management Plan - 'Plod' Boasted THai Firms Shared over 65% of the Cake," *Khaosod Newspaper*, January 6, 2013, http://www.khaosod.co.th/view_news.php?newsid=TURObFkyOHdNVEEYTURFMU5nPT0=. (in Thai)

¹⁴ Prachathai news, "Sa-eab Locals Sent a Letter Opposing Dams to Prime Minister and Transnational Companies," February 2, 2013, <http://prachatai.com/journal/2013/02/45090>; Community media centre for for a just society, "E-saan People Denounce Plodprasop, Against 3.5 Hundred Million Water Project," May 17, 2013, http://prachatham.com/detail.htm?code=n6_17052013_01. (in Thai)

capital, large-scale industrial projects, and contract farming over other uses. The mega-project plan for potassium mines in 10 provinces, covering over 1.3 million rai of land in the Northeast, for example, will demand a huge amount of water. A factor contributing to this concern is that one of the contracting companies in the national water management plan is the ITD-POWERCHINA JV group, which is part of the Italian-Thai group that is applying for a license to operate a potassium mine in the Northeast. This could be a serious source of competition for farmers and local people's usage of water.¹⁵

There are also plans to build 12 dams along the Mekong river in the Northeast (which will also affect Laos and Cambodia) for electricity production. There are a lot of concerns over the impact this may have on ecological, social and food security. Threats to food security include the loss of seaweed, reduction of farm lands near irrigated areas along the river, and the destruction of many fish species in the river; the main source of protein for 60 million marginalised people who depend on the river.¹⁶ Agri-businesses may still find ways to benefit from the reduction in natural fish quantities. For example, with monopoly over fish breed and other inputs, they may encourage fish contract farming along the Mekong river.¹⁷

There has also been an increasing monopoly control over agricultural seeds markets in Thailand. Markets for maize seeds, for example, are now dominated by agri-businesses.¹⁸ There have also been attempts by foreign agri-businesses to patent rice strains such as Jasmine rice which is traditionally grown in Thailand.¹⁹ The situation could also worsen as transnational biotechnology companies, such as Monsanto, try to introduce genetically modified (GM) seeds in Thailand. In 1995, Monsanto's experiment with the plantation of GM BT cotton in an open field environment in Loei province contaminated nearby fields. Between 2004 and 2008, GM papaya contaminations were found in around 10 provinces. Despite past problems with contamination, Monsanto is now working with Naraesuan University to ask for the state's permission to experiment with growing GM maize (NK603) in an open field environment. It is expected that this initiative will pave the way toward the introduction of GM seeds in other important commodities such as rice and chili.²⁰ The situation is troubling because, coupled with strict property rights agreements that Thailand might be signing in the near future, the growing use and contamination of GM seeds will increase and reinforce the monopoly power of biotechnology agri-businesses. This is because, for example, GM seeds usually require complementary pesticides and other inputs from the same companies. Under these strict property rights agreements, farmers might have to pay royalty fees if their crops are contaminated by GM plants, and it is likely that farmers will not be allowed to save seeds and must instead buy new seeds from companies.

¹⁵ Decha Kambaomuang (Community Media Centre for for a Just Society), "E-saan NGOs Criticised Water Plan for Mega-projects; Setting Work Committee to Investigate," *Prachathai news*, February 8, 2013, <http://www.prachatai3.info/journal/2013/02/45180>. (in Thai)

¹⁶ Chaiphong Samniang, "Dams Along the Mekong River," (*article Based on a Research Sponsored by Thailand Research Fund*) *Bangkok Business News*, January 31, 2013, http://pr.trf.or.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1537:2013-01-31-09-21-05&catid=38:2010-06-10-02-36-38&Itemid=56. (in Thai)

¹⁷ Uthai Sa-aadchop, member of the Assembly of the Poor social movement from Sra-Kaew, Via Campesina conference, 12th November 2012, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand

¹⁸ Witoon Lienchamroon, "The Role of Agri-businesses and the Changes in Rural Thailand and Thai Society," (Bangkok: BioThai, 2011), 6, <http://www.biothai.net/node/10889>. (in Thai)

¹⁹ Matthew Clement, "Rice Imperialism: The Agribusiness Threat to Third World Rice Production," *Monthly Review* 55, no. 9 (2004), 15-17.

²⁰ Isra news, "Judiciary Declared the State Was Not Guilty for GM Papaya Contamination, Greenpeace Feared Monsanto Monopoly," April 2, 2013, <http://isranews.org/????????????????-????????/item/20372-gdsdds.html>. (in Thai)

Even though it is not the focus of this paper, it should be worth mentioning that aside from resource grabbing and monopoly control over agricultural production resources, there is also monopoly control over trade channels that is increasing in its intensity. It has been suggested that agri-businesses reproduce the logic of finance capital, seeking to “capture profits through price inflation” rather than through productivity advances.²¹ Agri-businesses with monopsony/monopoly power in the market can benefit from profit squeezing of petty commodity producers and by putting upward pressures on food prices paid by consumers, rather than a revolution in productivity gains.²² The Charoenpokaphand (CP) group - a very large transnational agri-business based in Thailand, controlled over 20% of the market in chick production, 20% in the pork retail sector, 40% in animal feed and 20% of the total export market in 2001.²³ Aside from owning some retail stores such as CP fresh marts and 7-11 convenience stores, CP has just purchased MAKRO, which is a major wholesale supermarket chain.²⁴ In Thailand, there have been many studies which suggest that contract farming- the amalgamation of monopoly control over productive resources, processing, trade channels, and credit - yields lower benefits to small-scale farmers than to the contracting companies. For example, the 2003 report by the Thai Senate Committee on Agriculture and Co-operatives found that in most of the contracts, farmers had to follow conditions set by the companies which were not equitable.²⁵ Another study found that with contract farming, over 70% of small-scale farmers' costs of production will be in different forms of payment to agri-businesses, or as high as 85-90% with fish and chicken contract farming.²⁶

The Thai state's support of the corporate agri-food system

It has been suggested that large agri-businesses in Thailand have ties with political parties, educational institutions, the civil service, and other prominent institutions in Thailand through financial support and by giving other aids. They, in turn, benefits from state concessions and public research.²⁷ One very influential agri-business in Thailand is the Charoenpokapand (CP) group. Thanin Jearawaranont, President of the CP group, has proposed that under the global context of the food-energy crisis, Thailand should reduce land for rice production from 62 million rai to 25 million rai, and increase yields using CP rice seeds. The remaining area can then be used for rubber plantation and palm oil. Despite the fact that there has been some recognition in the Thai bureaucracy and studies which suggest that the CP hybrid rice seeds cannot compete with traditional rice strains (more expensive and not much more productive than traditional seeds²⁸), the CP group is very influential in the

²¹ Philip McMichael, “A Food Regime Analysis of the ‘world Food Crisis’,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 26, no. 4 (July 31, 2009): 284.

²² Jason W Moore, “Cheap Food & Bad Money. Food, Frontiers, and Financialization in the Rise and Demise of Neoliberalism,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 33, no. 2–3 (2012): 12.

²³ FAO, *Project on livestock industrialisation. Trade and Social-health-environment impacts in developing countries*, July 2003, quoted in Isabelle Delforge, *Contract Farming in Thailand: A view from the farm. A report for Focus on the Global South* (Bangkok: Focus on the Global South group, 2007), 11.

²⁴ Prachachat Thurakit Newspaper online, “CP Strategy: Combining Seven-eleven and MAKRO, Thanin Shifts Profit to Pay for Interests of 1.7 Hundred Million Loan,” 2013, n.d., http://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1367207518. (in Thai)

²⁵ Report on the investigation on contract farming of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Co-operatives, Bangkok, 2003, quoted in Delforge, *Contract Farming in Thailand: A view from the farm. A report for Focus on the Global South*, 5.

²⁶ Lienchamroon, “The Role of Agri-businesses and the Changes in Rural Thailand and Thai Society,” *op cit*, 8.
²⁷ *Ibid*, 12-13.

²⁸ BioThai foundation has done field research in 2008 in Kampangpet and Utaradit provinces to study the effects of a hybrid rice strain developed by CP company, and found that CP hybrid seeds increased productivity by only 15% while the costs were around 500% higher than local seeds. Hence, it was not sensible economically

decision making process of the Thai state and their suggestions usually receive positive responses. The Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives (BAAC), as well as local agricultural promotion offices, have mobilised to encourage farmers to join projects to grow CP hybrid rice.²⁹

The Thai state has consistently promoted both domestic and foreign large-scale agri-businesses operations and investments. Vertical integration of farming, processing and high value-added exports is encouraged by the state, and agro-industries have been growing rapidly.³⁰ As briefly mentioned earlier in this section, the Thai state's mega plan to centralise control over water might be used to benefit large capital and agri-businesses. There was also a national plan to develop biotechnology and to promote biotechnology investments from domestic and foreign capital between 2004 and 2011.³¹ In recent years, the Thailand Board of Investment (BOI) has been promoting foreign investments in bio-fuels production and other agro-processing industries, especially since 2008-2009. In 2010, as part of the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA) negotiation, the BOI suggested that Thailand should remove certain fisheries, forestry activities, and genetic improvements of plants from the sensitive list, allowing foreign investors to invest freely in these areas. There are many oppositions from NGOs who are concerned about land grabbing from small-scale farmers, the further destruction of forest areas, the competition for fresh water in agriculture, the increased control over genetic materials, bio-piracy, the privatisation of indigenous knowledge, as well as the increased monopoly control over the seeds market, not to mention the increased in competition for the use of basic infrastructure and public research between small-scale farmers and agri-businesses.³²

Thailand is also negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU, and is being pressured to modify the law to make it easier to patent and enforce a stricter property rights regime on the genetic materials of plants, in accordance with the international convention for the protection of new varieties of plants of 1991. This means, for example, eliminating a clause on sharing benefits of genetic materials; making it easier for seeds and biotechnology companies to patent any genetic materials in Thailand. In addition, it also means increasing patent protection from 12 years to 20 years.³³ The Department of Agriculture, agri-businesses and some academics in Thailand have been drafting this new law despite some concerns suggested by civil society groups.³⁴ In addition, the FTA negotiation process is not very transparent. Assoc. Prof. Dr Jirapon Limpananont, member of the National Economics and Social Development Board (NESDB) expressed concerns how the Ministry of Commerce did

for farmers to use CP hybrid rice seeds. In addition, farmers cannot save CP hybrid rice seeds for the next round of plantation, unlike traditional open pollinated seeds, so they would have to buy rice seeds every year from the company. BioThai, "Report on the Problems of Hybrid Rice Seeds: Case Study of Hybrid Rice Owned by the Charoenpokapand Group," 2009, 18-21, <http://www.biothai.net/node/150>. (in Thai)

²⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁰ Songsak Sriboonchitta, *Overview of Contract Farming in Thailand : Lessons Learned. ADBI Discussion Paper 112*. (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank, 2008), 1-2.

³¹ Lienchamroon and Thankitchanukit, *From the Green Revolution to Bio-engineering. Lessons for the future of Thai agriculture, op cit*, 275.

³² BioThai foundation, Thai life foundation (RRAFA), and Sustainable agriculture foundation Thailand, *Public policies' implications on food security, ASEAN free trade arrangements, and effects on farmers, natural resource, and the agricultural sector* (Bangkok: BioThai, 2009), 9-14. (in Thai)

³³ BioThai foundation, "Effects of Thai-EU FTA on Plant Genes, Biodiversity, and Food Security," February 26, 2013, <http://www.biothai.net/node/16573>. (in Thai)

³⁴ BioThai foundation, "The Effects of the New Plant Genetics Law," March 20, 2013, <http://www.biothai.net/node/16894>. (in Thai)

not reveal the framework for the FTA negotiation to the public. According to clause 190 of the Thai constitution, the government ought to organise a public venue to hear opinions from different sections in society, but they have not done so. On the other hand, Mr. Ponsil Patcharintanakul, senior advisor of the CP group, pushed the government to go ahead with discussing the passing of the FTA in parliament, and let those who are concerned about clause 190 take it up with the Supreme Court at later dates.³⁵

3) Resisting the corporate agri-food system: Alternative Agriculture and the land reform movement

In the present, there are two main types of resistance in the Thai agri-food system. The first is the Alternative Agriculture movement, and the second is the land reform movement that is pushing for community land title deeds (CLTDs) and other land reform measures. At times, they have been able to push forward their demands and gain some concessions from the state. However, these gains can be reversed. In addition, they are still far from being able to push for nation-wide reforms. There are also other green movements against resource grabbing, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them.

An overview of Alternative Agriculture movement

In 1989, a network of NGOs and small-scale farmers formally organised the first Alternative Agriculture network in Thailand. There are many forms of alternative agriculture, such as shifting cultivation, organic, agro-forestry, natural and integrated farming.³⁶ The term "alternative agriculture" includes both agricultural production and farmers' way of life. It allows for the restoration and preservation of the ecological and environmental balance, with fair economic and social returns, that increase the quality of life of farmers, consumers, and local social institutions.³⁷ The movement has received inspiration from alternative agriculture movements in other countries. For example, principles of natural farming of Masanobu Fukuoka from Japan, and organic farming experiences in Europe.³⁸ The most important foundation of the movement, however, is accumulated knowledge and experiences of individual Thai farmers, who applied traditional knowledge to create alternative forms of agriculture, such as Mahayoo Sunthornchai in Surin province. Some people are also influenced by Thai localism (appearing under names such as the community culture school of thought, self-sufficiency and self-reliance). Thai localist ideas began in the 1980s, along with the Alternative Agriculture movement, but have gained more attention after the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and after King Bhumipol's speech of the same year, urged for a self-sufficient economy.³⁹ According to Pasuk Phongpaichit, community culture is not a philosophy which pushes for a retreat or escape from modernity and globalisation, but is a strategy to offer a long-term way to integrate everyone into the national and international

³⁵ Prachatai news, "NESDB Warns the Government the Unconstitutional Risk of Not Listening to Public Opinions Regarding Thai-EU FTA," January 16, 2013, <http://prachatai.com/journal/2013/01/44713>. (in Thai)

³⁶ Witoon Lienchamroon, "Alternative agriculture: a path of free, independent agriculture. A document summarising the academic content of the third congress of alternative agriculture (18-21 November 2004 at Kasetsart University)," in *Reform the agricultural sector for food security: analysis and practical policies*, ed. Witoon Lienchamroon (Nonthaburi: BioThai, 2011), 167 - 173. (in Thai)

³⁷ Witoon Lienchamroon and Supha Yaimuang, "Alternative agriculture: from individual farmers to social movements," in *Reform the agricultural sector for food security: analysis and practical policies*, ed. Witoon Lienchamroon (Nonthaburi: BioThai, 2011), 269. (in Thai)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁹ Pasuk Phongpaichit, "Developing social alternatives. Walking backwards into a khlung," in *Thailand beyond the crisis*, ed. Peter Warr (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 162.

economy from the bottom up, where communities would build on their own wisdom and resource, but not statically and not in isolation, and with help from modern ideas and technology.⁴⁰

It is not necessarily the case that everyone in the Alternative Agriculture movement is inspired by Thai localism. Nevertheless, they often work at community/local levels and believe in expanding the alternative production-consumption network.⁴¹ Broadly speaking, there are two broad types of activities that they engage in; building alternative production-consumption linkages, and political advocacy. Within the groups of people who dedicate themselves to promoting the production of sustainable agriculture and green/local/fair trade market channels, there are those who focus more on empowering small-scale farmers and community-driven businesses, such as community rice mills, and those who focus more on scaling-up and increasing commercial quantities of, for example, organic products. In general, the first group (e.g. NGOs and local farmers) tends to focus more on local and domestic markets whereas the latter group (e.g. Ministry of Commerce and social enterprises such as the greenet co-operative) focuses more on exports.

There are some groups of NGOs/farmers who have been actively engaging in political lobbying to push for national reforms of the agri-food system; these include BioThai foundation (headed by Mr. Witoon Lienchamroon), Sustainable Agriculture foundation (SATHAI, headed Mrs. Supha Yaimuang), and Khao Kwan foundation (headed by Mr. Decha Siripat). They have had some success in the 1990s; their protest stopped the signing of Thailand-US FTA which would have enforced a stricter property rights regime, pressured the state to halt the plantation of GM seeds due to contamination concerns, pushed for the 8th National Economic and Social Development (NESD) plan to suggest that 25% of farm areas should follow sustainable production methods, and a significant amount of funding for their pilot programmes to promote sustainable agriculture.⁴² It should be noted, however, that some of these achievements can be reversed, especially when social movements are relatively much weaker compare to political-economic elites' power to capture state apparatus. As mentioned briefly in section 2, there are renewed ongoing attempts to introduce GM seeds in Thailand, as well as the prospects of Thailand-EU (and perhaps Thailand-US) FTA(s), which are likely to introduce a strict property rights regime that will increase monopoly control of corporations over seeds. The NESD plans are, as usual, just plans with no real policy implications. In general, the political power of the Alternative Agriculture movement is still limited.⁴³

As part of the Assembly of the Poor movement, the Alternative Agriculture network proposed the establishment of a fund to promote sustainable agriculture to the Chavalittr Yongchaiyut government on 2 and 9 December 1996, quoting the NESD 8th plan which suggests that farmers should have the right to ask for sustainable agriculture development funding.⁴⁴ The Chavalit government approved a 950 million baht budget for a four year

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 138.

⁴¹ Lienchamroon and Yaimuang, "Alternative Agriculture: From Individual Farmers to Social Movements," *op cit*, 294.

⁴² *Ibid*, 295; Decha Siripat, interviewed 14 October 2012 and Witoon Lienchamroon, interviewed 5 April 2012, Nonthaburi, Thailand.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 295-296.

⁴⁴ Summary of initial demands of the Assembly of the Poor, 14 January 1997, and Decha Siripat, interviewed 8 August 2003, quoted in Anusorn Unno, *Social Movements for Common Resource Rights in the Thai Society: Alternative Agriculture in the Context of Property Rights System* (Nonthaburi: Alternative Agriculture Fair committee, 2004), 231-232.

programme (to be implemented from 1998-2001).⁴⁵ The main reasons why the government made some concessions were because: 1) the party relied on votes from poor Northeastern farmers who formed a major part of the Assembly of the Poor movement; 2) the government's legitimacy and credibility were almost non-existent during the Asian Economic crisis of 1997, so the government might felt the need to do whatever they could to appease the population.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the succeeding Democrat government led by Chuan Leekphai (November 1997 to February 2001) adopted a conservative stand and revoked most of the concessions made to the Assembly of the Poor. They could not, however, cancel the pilot programmes because it had already been approved by various departments, so they slowed it down. It took three years until the cabinet finally approved the funding of 633 million baht to be implemented from 2001-2003.⁴⁷

The management of the pilot programmes' fund was geographically decentralised in the hands of civil society groups. Broad aims were to make sure the fund benefited small-scale farmers (who usually organised themselves as self-help groups), to pass on knowledge relating to sustainable agriculture, to support sustainable production inputs such as small-scale irrigation system and green market channels, and to fund practical research that helped the learning process of the locals and/or sustainable agriculture.⁴⁸ From the author's fieldwork experience in the Northeastern part of Thailand in December 2012, a lot of the farmers in the Alternative Agriculture movement had mentioned that the pilot programmes helped them to develop their farms; to make the land and water system more suitable for organic agriculture. Nevertheless, these pilot programmes were "project based". They might have benefited local communities and local farmers, which would have strengthened the Alternative Agriculture movement. However, it was difficult to suggest that the programmes had any direct positive influence on the agri-food system as a whole.

Many attempts to lobby the government by the Alternative Agriculture movement were completely unsuccessful. For example, in the early 2000s, the movement pushed for the passing of a law that would have increased the tax on chemical pesticides and used that tax money to support sustainable agriculture, as well as impose bans and control of advertisement of these products. The idea received some support from Mr. Prapat Panyachatrak, a famous student activist in the 1970s, who was Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Co-operatives (from February 2001 to October 2002) during the first Thaksin administration. Before the proposal could be discussed in parliament, Prapat Panyachatrak was replaced by Nevin Chidchop, who was rather hostile to Alternative Agriculture and revoked all state supports. People in the Alternative Agriculture movement believed that they were unsuccessful because the lobbying power of transnational agri-businesses was too great, and that the influence of these companies extended to all governments and all political parties.⁴⁹

In general, the Alternative Agriculture movement has had limited success in pushing the Thai state to carry out serious policies to promote sustainable agriculture. There is some interest in the Ministry of Commerce in promoting organic agriculture (even more so than the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives), but that is mainly because they see opportunities for export and growing niche markets, not because they are motivated to transform the agri-food system in Thailand. If there is any interest from the Thai state at all regarding this issue,

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 235-236.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 237 and Decha Siripat, interviewed 8 August 2003, quoted in Unno, *op cit*, 238.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 247-271.

⁴⁹ Decha Siripat, interviewed 14 October 2012, Nonthaburi, Thailand.

it seems that they are more interested in food safety and good agricultural practice products (GAP) which allow some pesticides, rather than sustainable agriculture.⁵⁰ Prapat Panyachatrak, now the chairman of the recently formed National Farmer Council, has also suggested that the Thai state is not serious about sustainable agriculture and that there is no department in the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives that is directly responsible in promoting it. One of the main reasons for this is that there is no "monetary rewards" from promoting sustainable agriculture, whereas conventional/industrial agriculture promotes the uses of chemical pesticides and fertilisers - products with tens of millions of baht sales.⁵¹

Because of limited success in lobbying the state to promote nation-wide (or wider scale) changes in the agri-food system, some people in the Alternative Agriculture movement think that it is better to spend their time and energy building linkages between producer groups and consumers, such as through green market channels. For example, Mr. Viton Panyakul of Green Net co-operative, one of the first few people who helped promote organic agriculture production and a market for it, suggested that civil society cannot wait for help from the state, and that even though Green Net has some co-operation with the state, it is more in the form of "damage control" of certain policies that might obstruct their work, rather than lobbying for changes in policies and laws.⁵² On the one hand, this sounds like a rational strategy, but on the other hand, it might imply that these people are accepting that sustainable agriculture can only be an "alternative" production method to serve niche markets.

The Land reform network

Land occupations, as known as "ground-up land reform initiatives" by participants, started around 1998 in Lamphun and Chiang Mai and have developed into the practice of community land title deeds (CLTDs) and other land reform demands. After the Asian economic crisis in 1997, a lot of workers in Thailand lost their jobs in the industrial and service sectors. The economic necessity of having nil or insufficient land - for subsistence and to produce in exchange for income - prompted many people to form groups to occupy land in their local communities. Since around 2008, the land reform network has become clearer in its positions and has put forward three main demands for the government: 1) to support CLTDs; 2) to establish a national land bank; and 3) to implement progressive land taxation. The main goal is to redistribute land to marginalised people through CLTDs, in areas where the locals have established a reliable democratic local governance system. A national land bank will also aid CLTDs in two main ways: to help facilitate land purchases for redistribution and to fund land purchases from individual members back to the communities. Progressive land taxation is a measure to encourage those who have large holdings of land to release these lands and to discourage land speculations.⁵³ At the leadership level (farmer leaders, NGOs and academics), the goals of the movement are also about empowering marginalised people, safeguarding agricultural land and promoting sustainable agriculture to solve problems of the agri-food system.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Wibulwan Wannamolee, senior officer at the Office of Agricultural Standards and Accreditation, interviewed 31 January 2013, Nonthaburi, Thailand.

⁵¹ Prapat Panyachatrak, interviewed 29 January 2013, National Farmer Council, Bangkok, Thailand.

⁵² Viton Panyakul, interviewed 23 January 2013, Green Net office, Bangkok, Thailand.

⁵³ A summary based on interviews with various people in the movement and from Pongthip Samranjit, "A Summary of Research on Ground-up Land Reforms by Communities," July 22, 2011, <http://www.landreformthai.net>, retrieved November 2012. (in Thai)

⁵⁴ *Ibid*; Prayong Doklamyai, interviewed 1 November 2012, Chiang Mai; The Land Reform Network, *CLTDs - We Can: a Handbook* (Bangkok: Land reform network, 2012), 14. (in Thai)

The movement received inspirations from community rights ideas, and on the work of Anan Kanchanapand from Chiang Mai University, who has written about pre-capitalist traditional norms of the governance of common pool resource often called "*Na-moo*" rights, and a more general concept of "multiple rights" to use land and natural resource, as opposed to "single" ownership right to land. In sum, multiple rights in the CLTDs context means that the ownership of land is common, but that individuals receive private usage rights. It does not mean giving exclusive rights to the local communities, but implies the involvement of other parties (such as the state and civil society) in the governance of natural resource in a form of check and balances.⁵⁵ CLTDs were designed to solve the problem of land grabbing by not allowing land controlled by the community to be sold to people outside of the community.⁵⁶ Under CLTDs, land is decommodified, as the land does not belong to those who have the money (or power) to buy it, but to those who truly work the land. As Direk Kong-ngern, a local leader from Ban-pong has said, "*my deeds are my cha-om and mango leaf*."⁵⁷ People in the community are allocated some private plots of land for agricultural purposes, and as living spaces. Land usage and exchanges are governed by democratic community rules. Members have regular meetings e.g. to discuss community development and are able to vote to select management committee members.

Some of the land occupiers throughout the country have faced many legal suits and intimidations. It has been estimated (in the period between January and April 2012) that there have been over 6,000 cases against land occupiers.⁵⁸ Some sympathetic national policies were made during the Abhisit Vejjachewa government (from December 2008 to August 2011). Over 435 communities had applied for CLTDs (partly because the government started to become more sympathetic), but so far only two communities have been granted CLTDs by the prime minister's office.⁵⁹ This is not to say, however, that the Abhisit government was actively promoting CLTDs, national land bank and progressive land taxation. It can be argued that they could have done more by, for example, drafting a law on CLTDs instead of relying on a CLTDs decree issued by the prime minister's office, which has less legal significance and status.

Succeeding the Abhisit government (Democrat party) in August 2011 was the Yingluck Shinnawatre government (Phua Thai party). People in the land reform movement seem to believe that the current Yingluck government is not committed to continue the work of the previous regime when it comes to CLTDs. For example, Yingluck then promised to start a formal negotiation to solve the problems of the P-move group in November 2012, but up until the present, there has not been any progress to the point that P-move had to stage a demonstration in Bangkok starting 6 May 2013 to pressure the government to carry out the promises.⁶⁰ Resistance and intimidation from local authorities and private sources are still ongoing, but the intensity depends on many factors e.g. they type of land they occupy (private land or supposedly "forest" land, which is very problematic to define) and local politics. An example of extreme violent cases include in Suratthani Province in the South, where two

⁵⁵ Anan Kanchanapand, interviewed 29 October 2012, Chiang Mai.

⁵⁶ Samranjit, "A Summary of Research on Ground-up Land Reforms by Communities," *op cit*.

⁵⁷ Interviewed 30 September 2012, Bangkok.

⁵⁸ A lecturer at Law, Chiang Mai university, Thodsapol Thadsanakulpan, quoted in Isra news, "Academics: Court to Consider Community Rights in Land Conflict Cases, and the Political Dimension of Land Tax Law," June 25, 2012, <http://www.isranews.org/community-news/กระแสนชุมชน/2-community-network/7347-2012-06-25-08-57-08.html>, retrieved 24 April 2013. (in Thai)

⁵⁹ Kom Chad Luek newspaper, "Mae-Aow Villagers Smile for the Second CLTDs from the Prime Minister," March 18, 2011, <http://www.komchadluek.net/detail/20110318/91899>, retrieved 24 April 2013. (in Thai)

⁶⁰ P-Move, "P-move Declaration Number 18," 26 April 2013. (in Thai)

female members of the Southern Federation of Farmers (part of the land reform network) from Klongsaipattana community were assassinated by M16 war gun(s) in December 2012.⁶¹ Recently, on 25 April 2013, two more locals in the Northeast were given 6 months prison sentences by the court of appeals for occupying forest land (even though it has been argued by the defense that the land was declared forest land by the government long after people have settled on the land).⁶²

Due to many such legal and political-economic constraints, people in the land reform movement are stretched thin. Fighting wars on all fronts, they find it difficult to develop the land under CLTDs further, let alone in the forms of sustainable agriculture. Local-level governance of land through CLTDs challenge the centralised capitalist Thai state, and it is not a surprise if political-economic elites may not want to give support nor legitimacy to something that might threaten their power. In addition, unlike the Democrat party, Phua Thai had their own rural populist policies which are very popular with the rural population, that they do not need to pay serious attention to ground-up land reform initiatives to gain more votes. This issue is discussed in the next section.

5) Political bi-polarisation, co-optation of opposition and rural populist policies

This paper uses a Gramscian term "co-optation of opposition" to refer to a deliberate strategy to prevent popular participation and systemic change within the policies and procedures of political institutions through ideational distortion.⁶³ It can also be understood as a strategy of assimilation that domesticates potentially dangerous ideas by adjusting them to a dominant coalition, thus, obstructing the formation of class-based organised opposition to the status quo.⁶⁴ Co-optations in the current corporate agri-food system include attempts at transforming the discussion on food security to make it compatible with corporate interests. For example, GM seeds and land grabbing in developing countries are being justified as methods to ensure food security.⁶⁵

There are different forms of co-optation of oppositions relating to the agri-food system in Thailand. Some of these are similar to what is happening in other countries, but there are also some specific cultural and political-economic aspects. This paper focuses on the two most important forms of co-optation which are linked under the context of current political bi-polarisation in Thailand; the conservative interpretation and implementation of localism ideas and self-sufficiency policies, as well as rural populist policies which simplify and mask structural problems in the agri-food system. It also discusses the *Sakdina* cultural mentality and patron-client relationships in Thailand which contribute to such forms of co-optation of opposition in Thailand.

⁶¹ Prachatai news, "P-move Asks Supreme Court to Stop the Delay of the Enforcement of the Ruling on the Palm Oil Land Conflict in Suratthani, as the Delay Has Led to Violence," December 25, 2012, <http://prachatai.com/journal/2012/12/44383>, retrieved 25 April 2013. (in Thai)

⁶² E-saan land reform news, "The Appeal Court Has Sentenced 2 Thung-lui-lai Locals to Prison," April 25, 2013, <http://www.esaanlandreformnews.com/news-01/165/ศาลอุทธรณ์-อ่านคำพิพากษาชาวบ้านทุ่งลุยลา-นอนคุก-2-ราย..html>, retrieved 25 April 2013. (in Thai)

⁶³ Bill Paterson, "Trasformismo at the World Trade Organization," in *Gramsci and Global Politics. Hegemony and resistance*, ed. Mark McNally and John Schwarzmantel (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 47.

⁶⁴ Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, hegemony and International Relations: An essay on method," *Millenium* 12, no. 2 (1983): 166-167, quoted in *Ibid*, 47.

⁶⁵ McMichael, "The Food Regime in the Land Grab : Articulating ' Global Ecology ' and 'Political Economy','" *op cit*, 4-6.

Sakdina cultural mentality and patron-client relationships

Thailand used to be, for a very long time, under the rule of the absolute monarchy in which the Sakdina system had regulated the social order since the late 15th Century. Essentially, the basic hierarchical cleavage in the Sakdina society was between the royalty and aristocracy on the one hand and the peasantry on the other.⁶⁶ Even when the Sakdina and corvee system were abolished, it has been argued by many academics that the traditional personal linkages between the people of different classes persisted in a form of hierarchical patron-client relationships. In a hierarchy of relative power, those higher up in the hierarchy maintain power through the support of those below them. Those lower down in the hierarchy in turn expect tangible benefits from their patrons. The patronage roles are typically filled by state officials, politicians and middlemen.⁶⁷

In addition to the remaining patron-client relationships, the “Sakdina attitude” or the “Sakdina culture” are still pretty much alive in the minds of the people. The terms are usually used to refer to how those in positions of power tend to see the people below the hierarchy as “subjects” or as “peasants” to be ruled over paternalistically. The rulers also expected these people to “know their place”, which often implies that they should not make too many demands on the more powerful people. The people lower in the hierarchy can internalise this attitude and think that it is the natural order of things to behave in the expected manner. The Sakdina attitude has become infused in the working culture of the Thai bureaucracy. It can also be seen as a form of cultural hegemony, which affects the state and civil service's rural development policies, as discussed below.

Conservative promotion of localism and self-sufficiency ideas

Often seen as part of self-sufficiency economy policies, the Thai state has made some attempts to promote diluted versions of alternative agriculture. For example, the state's definition of alternative agriculture allows the use of some chemical inputs.⁶⁸ The civil service's mechanical promotion of self-sufficiency economy is also problematic, and it has been argued that such policy has become a tool of bureaucratic ideological control.⁶⁹ For example, the civil service has used the self-sufficiency program to teach and impose a certain morality on the locals, using the people's fear of authority to force them to co-operate, and use the King's name to legitimise their project, not to mention that they try to implement standard programs on every region without taking into account local differences, nor involve local farmers in the decision making process.⁷⁰ Because such self-sufficiency policies promoted by the bureaucracy are so problematic, it serves to confuse and alienate people from the real understanding of self-sufficiency and alternative agriculture. One of the main reasons why the Thai bureaucracy implemented rural development policies in such manners is partly the Sakdina attitude that still exists in its working culture.

A few scholars are very critical of Thai localism, and see self-sufficient ideas as mainly conservative forces. For example, McCargo (2001) suggests that localism discourse is

⁶⁶ Charles F. Keyes, *Thailand: Buddhist Kingdom as Modern Nation-State* (Bangkok: Westview press, 1987), 135.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 136.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 237-249.

⁶⁹ Phruk Thaotawil, “Self-sufficiency project at the village level: elitist control over the rural sector,” *Fah-Diewkan academic magazine* 6, no. 2 (April-June 2008): 71 and 73. (in Thai)

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 86.

a call to return to Thai agrarian roots, which is conservative and nostalgic, and also closely resemble the official Thai nationalism which is elitist and statist.⁷¹ This is understandable given examples of bureaucratic promotion of self-sufficiency and alternative agriculture policies. However, these studies do not take into account different forms of self-sufficiency and localism where some are more progressive/non co-opted than the others, and that there are people who are inspired to empower themselves and create alternatives to the agri-food system through these ideas. For example, community rights ideas, usually grouped under the heading of Thai localism, have inspired the land reform movement and CLTDs. Hence, one should ask if there is ground to the criticisms that community and localism discourses can only be conservative and ought to be dismissed. In addition, it is interesting to note the possibility that there are also those who criticise localism and self-sufficient ideas for political gains, as discussed in the part about political bi-polarisation.

Political-economic elites/state managers, populist rural policies and patron-client relations

Populist rural policies, which were a mark of the Thaksin Shinawatra's administration (2001 to 2006; ousted by a coup d'état) reinforce the hierarchical patron-client attitude, while claiming to solve rural poverty problems.⁷² The rhetoric of Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai party in general have tried to forge the rural population's dependency on their policies, establishing Thaksin and his party as the biggest patron of the rural poor, regardless of the fact that the policies were unlikely to contribute much to solving the structural problems of rural poverty, as they suggest that the problems facing small-scale farmers and the rural population are mainly due to the lack of money.⁷³ From a quick outside glance, policies such as the debt moratorium for small-scale farmers and the scheme to provide a one million baht fund for each village, would benefit the rural population and small-scale farmers. Detailed examinations of the fine print of these policies, however, suggest that they can be used to reinforce capitalist agriculture. For example, giving farmers more credits to encourage purchases of pesticides and inputs under the control of large agri-businesses. While patron-client relations are reinforced, a large proportion of the rural population have also become accustomed to such hand-out policies, which prevent them from analysing structural problems in the agri-food system.

Despite trying to display progressively pro-poor images, Thaksin Shinawatra, his family and close associates own business empires, and have been accused of many corruption charges as well as using political positions to increase the family fortune.⁷⁴ In relation to investment in the agri-food sector, there were rumours that Thaksin had encouraged Middle East capitalists to purchase/invest in rice paddy fields in Suphanburi in the Central part of

⁷¹ Duncan McCargo, "Populism and Reformism in Contemporary Thailand," *South East Asia Research* 9, no. 1 (2001): 89–107.

⁷² Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker had suggested that the TRT populist rural policies were actually attempts to replace the old local patron-client relationships and transfer the rural people's loyalty directly to the TRT party. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: the business of politics in Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Silksworms Books, 2004), 188-189.

⁷³ There are quite a few studies of the Thai Rak Thai rural development policies such as Ammar Siamwalla and Somchai Jitsuchon, *Tackling Poverty: Liberalism, Populism or Welfare State. A Paper Presented at the Annual Thailand Development Research Institute Academic Seminar, 10-11th November 2007* (Cholburi, Thailand, 2007). (in Thai)

⁷⁴ For example, a discussion of how Thaksin used his political power to benefit his family business empire eg telecommunications can be found in Chapter 7 "Power and Profit" by Phongpaichit and Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand, op cit.*

Thailand in 2008,⁷⁵ not to mention that he and his wife had engaged in massive-scale land purchases.⁷⁶

The Phua Thai party currently in power is more or less the old Thai Rak Thai party (abolished under court's order) under a new name, especially since it is led by Yingluck Shinnawatre who is Thaksin's sister. The party has not departed from such rural/agricultural populist policies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss their rural populist policies in detail, but one good example of heavily criticised policy is the rice mortgage scheme. Under this scheme, the government promised to buy rice at the price which is a lot higher than the market price and therefore it has monopoly control over most of the rice supply in the country. The rationale given was that the government would act as a speculator and sell the rice when the international market price is high, to repay the large sum of tax payer's money that was used to purchase rice at a high price. This plan does not work due to many reasons, and the scheme has been criticised for allowing large-scale corruption. It has allowed large capital to benefit from the high prices of rice while small-scale farmers do not benefit as much as they should. Sompon Iswilanont, senior researcher at the Knowledge Network Institute of Thailand, suggested that from his fieldwork, the rice mortgage scheme mostly benefited large-scale farmers because small-scale farmers cannot afford the high transport cost to the mills. In addition, more and more small-scale rental farmers are being pushed off their land, or see massive increases in rental prices.⁷⁷ Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) study has similar concerns. For example, farmers who benefited are middle and upper class farmers while a very small number of poor farmers benefited. There are many ways to waste tax payers' money through this scheme, and the Thai rice export market has also been very negatively affected.⁷⁸ The scheme has also been criticised for destroying smaller scale operators along the rice chains, and for discouraging the production of quality and organic rice.⁷⁹ In addition, there are reports that due to the artificially high price incentives, some landlords in Ayuthya and Lopburi province have increased land rents (50-100%), stopped renting to landless farmers, or buying up more land in response to this policy.⁸⁰

Despite piles of evidence which suggest that the rice mortgage scheme is unsustainable and will not solve the problems of the agri-food system, the policy is portrayed by the government and its supporters as being very pro-poor/pro-farmers, and that those who criticise the policies are those who look down upon, or are unsympathetic to the poor. Sometimes the criticisms are portrayed as a political manoeuvre by certain elites to discredit the government. Environmental concerns from increased usage of pesticides to produce rice,

⁷⁵ Manager newspapers (weekly), "Grass Roots Nominee In The Age of Dead Thais," August 7, 2008, <http://www.manager.co.th/mgrWeekly/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=951000093001>. (in Thai)

⁷⁶ For example, his wife managed to purchase 33 rai of land near Ratchadapisek road from the Financial Institutions Development Fund, which was under the control of the Bank of Thailand, at below market price, when Thaksin was Prime Minister.

⁷⁷ Interviewed by Krungthep Turakij (Bangkok Business Newspaper), "Warning Rice Mortgage Scheme Disaster Collapse in the Agricultural Sector and Risk of Loss of Profits," April 16, 2012, <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com>. (in Thai)

⁷⁸ Thailand Development Research Institute, "Pros-Cons of the Rice Mortgage Scheme," September 2012, <http://tdri.or.th/tdri-insight/ar3>. (in Thai)

⁷⁹ Based on many interviews with farmers, civil servants, community rice mills managers and NGOs in Alternative Agriculture network, mostly in the Northeast of Thailand, such as Ms. Sompoi Jansang, manager of the Rice Fund Surin Organic Agriculture Co-operative, 19 December 2012, Surin, Thailand.

⁸⁰ Post Today Newspaper, "Farmers complain to the government about exorbitant land rents", October 3, 2011, B12. (in Thai)

and organic rice, are also sometimes ridiculed as middle class concerns.⁸¹ In a way, the policy divides farmers into factions. On the one hand, some farmers, such as those in the Alternative Agriculture movement, criticised the rice mortgage scheme. On the other hand, some farmers who supported Phua Thai party demonstrated against academics who criticised the rice mortgage scheme.⁸² It has been suggested that many farmers and marginalised people feel very defensive of rural populist policies because, for many decades, they have been neglected and weakened by the state. When they gained something from rural populist policies (even short term monetary gains) they felt like they could die for those who came up with such policies, as they never had anything or any political party to depend on before.⁸³ The current political bi-polarisation is also forcing people to choose sides, creating factions, as well as distract the people from real structural political-economic-ecological issues at hand.

Political bi-polarisation

The current political bi-polarisation in Thailand is often simplified as having two sides; the yellow shirts (those who oppose Thaksin Shinawatra, his family, and Phua Thai party, while being pro-monarchy) versus red shirts (those who oppose the military and feudal elites, while being pro-Thaksin, his family and Phua Thai party). However, in reality, there are many shades of yellow and red. For example, some red shirt supporters do not necessarily support Thaksin Shinawatra. In addition, a lot of people do not want to take sides, even though they are critical of the Phua Thai party and ties between large capital and the Thai state. The yellow shirts movement formed during the 2nd Thaksin administration (starting 2004). They staged demonstrations against the Thaksin government on charges of massive scale corruptions and conflict of interests⁸⁴. None of the public protests was able to force the Prime Minister to resign until the Thai army, which claimed to be loyal to the monarchy, staged a *coup d'état* in September 2006. It can be argued that the 2006 *coup d'état* was a result of the clash of elite interests,⁸⁵ justified by political social movements against corruptions. Aside from possible business competition between "new money" and "old money",⁸⁶ other possible conflicts between the two ruling elites include the competition in creating personal networks of contacts in state institutions, and the popularity contests for the rural population's loyalty⁸⁷. In retaliation to the pro-monarchy coup d'état in 2006, a mass-

⁸¹ Online social network, websites and discussions of red shirt supporters; Nithi Iewsriwong, "Changing Thailand with the Rice Mortgage Scheme," *Mathichon Newspaper*, November 5, 2012, http://www.mathichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1352088566&grpId=03&catid=03 (in Thai); Nithi Iewsriwong, "Changing Thailand with the Rice Mortgage Scheme (one More Time)," *Mathichon Newspaper*, December 3, 2012, http://www.mathichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1354506138&grpId=03&catid=03 (in Thai); Kam Pakha, "Morality Leads Thailand Towards Destruction," *Mathichon (weekly)*, 14-20 January 2011. (in Thai)

⁸² Krungthep Turakij (Bangkok Business Newspaper), "Farmers Protest NIDA Professors for Criticising the Rice Mortgage Scheme," October 2, 2012, <http://www.bangkokbiznews.com/home/detail/politics/politics/20121002/472389/ชาวนาประท้วงอ.นิคิต้า-เหตุก้านจ่าน้ำข้าว.html>. (in Thai)

⁸³ Prapat Panyachatrak, interviewed 29 January 2013, NFC, Bangkok, Thailand

⁸⁴ Other criticisms include, for example: dictatorial tendency, suppression of free media, violation of human rights in the war against drugs.

⁸⁵ Kevin Hewison, "A Book, the King and the 2006 Coup," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008), 200.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 206.

⁸⁷ The palace has a network of government officials, police and military officers and civilians in a personal network of contacts, maintained by the Privy Council members, estimated to be around 6,000 people by mid 1970s (Kasian Tejapira, "Toppling Thaksin," *New Left Review* 39 (2006), 19.). However, Thaksin had reformed organisations linked to the palace's network and promoted those who support TRT in key positions instead. The

based political movement called the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or the "red shirts", was formed, and is now a strong supporter of the Phua Thai party.

The main problem with existing political bi-polarisation is that it reduces discussions of national concerns to having only "two opposing sides", and distract the people from the social and ecological destruction threats posed by the capitalist system. The red shirts have constructed a discourse where they present themselves as "peasants" (or "Phrai" in Thai) who are fighting for marginalised people's causes and to eliminate elitist (and feudal) or what they call the "am-mart" influence in Thai society. The definition of the "am-mart" is very vague and has come to include not only groups of people usually associated with the monarchy and the 2006 coup d'état, such as the privy council, but also institutions and people who criticise the Phua Thai government such as some senators, academics, and the Supreme Court. Another vague term that they have invented is "salim" which is used broadly to call people (supposedly middle class) who criticise the Phua Thai government and/or are still loyal to the monarchy. Such top-down engineered discourses serve to increase red shirt supporters' intolerance of different views, and stop any rational debates in Thai society. For example, those who criticise the rice mortgage scheme are sometimes portrayed as unsympathetic to farmers. Even some civil society networks, which have built themselves up over the past two to three decades, are often dubbed by red shirt intellectuals as being part of the "am-mart's network."⁸⁸

Thai society has been focusing too much attention on the red-yellow conflict that it tends to ignore other smaller-scale demonstrations by marginalised people. On the one hand, red shirt intellectuals and supporters sometimes see demands by other social movements as "minor" and that Phua Thai party's policies alone are sufficient.⁸⁹ The red shirts sometimes mobilise to stop other social movements and to "defend" their government. For example, when some NGOs announced that they might stage a protest to hand in their objections of the 3,500 million baht water management project at the 2nd Asia-Pacific water summit in Chiang Mai province (14-20 May 2013), 100 people from the Rak Chiang Mai 51 group - a branch of the red shirts - gathered in front of the conference venue, ready to react against the NGOs.⁹⁰ On the other hand, some of those who do not support the red shirts are wary of pro-poor/pro-peasant rhetoric and discussions, and ignore the fact that there is real social need to address problems facing rural and marginalised people in Thai society.

Discussions on agrarian/rural development options have also sometimes become narrower, as if there are only two opposing paths. Such narrow views associated with bi-polarised politics make it difficult for agrarian social movements to expand their networks. Rural populist policies are sometimes portrayed by the red shirts as modern globalised choices compare to the backward path of development offered by those who utilises localism terms, such as community rights and self-reliance - partly as these are the terms associated with the self-sufficiency principles advocated by the King of Thailand. After the coup d'état in 2006, some NGOs were uncertain about their political beliefs and future strategies, and

palace and royal elites were also uncomfortable with the TRT's appeal to the rural population, which they saw as the monarchy's rural constituency (Hewison, *op cit*, 206-207).

⁸⁸ Prapat Pintoptaeng, academic at political science department, Chulalongkorn University, interviewed 16 October 2012, Nonthaburi, Thailand.

⁸⁹ Prapat Pintoptaeng, interview, *op cit*.

⁹⁰ Manager newspaper online, "Rak Chiang Mai 51 Shows Support to 'Plod' - Threatens NGOs Causing Chaos at the Water Summit - Prepares to Mobilise Thousands to Resist," May 16, 2013, <http://www.manager.co.th/Local/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9560000058929>. (in Thai)

their collaborations and activities suffered as a consequence.⁹¹ To a certain extent, some NGOs believe that agrarian social movements have been weakened due to political bipolarisation, and the lack of unity partly makes large-scale mobilisation difficult.⁹² The situation has got better in recent years, but it is still difficult for agrarian social movements to try to expand their network and alliances without being labelled as either red or yellow. For example, during their demonstration in Bangkok in May 2013, P-move (the land reform movement) had tried not to be labelled as red or yellow, but when certain senators went to visit them and gave speeches to show support, some people expressed scepticism and questioned their political neutrality, and might have felt alienated from the movement. Mr. Piroj Polpechr, secretary of NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (North), has summed up the problem quite well when he explained that certain NGOs have the tendency to criticise large capital and the capitalist system because they work with local people who are adversely affected by pro-capitalist government policies. Once they have analysed the roots of the problems as stemming from the state and capitalism, they cannot put the blame on the "am-mart". Nevertheless, because they tend to criticise businessmen, large capital and politicians rather than "am-mart", some people think these NGOs have chosen a side in the political conflict,⁹³ and may ignore their causes.

6) Conclusion

This paper discusses three main issues: 1) resource grabbing and large corporate domination over the agri-food system in Thailand; 2) limited success of Alternative Agriculture and the land reform movement in pushing for reforms; and 3) some of the main political-economic-ideological challenges facing the movements. Many important issues are not explained in detail, such as the linkages between capital accumulation, financialisation and the agri-food system in Thailand, due to the limited space of the paper.

Some other challenges facing the agrarian social movements have not been discussed. For example, the knowledge intensive nature of organic and agro-ecological farming have often proved to be too demanding for individual small-scale farmers. Building up and strengthening agrarian social movements in Thailand is also a very difficult task, as the rural-urban divide in the country is very large. The middle-upper class (mostly in urban areas) and the rural population seem to live in two different worlds, and hence building alliances might be difficult. Nevertheless, despite the unfavourable odds, given the ecological and social unsustainability of the current agri-food system in Thailand, there does not seem to be any other option but to at least try to empower the people's movement and to push for reforms.

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⁹¹ Switta Teerowattanakul, Northern Peasants Federation, interviewed 29 October 2012, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

⁹² Witoon Lienchamroon, interviewed 5 April 2012, Nonthaburi, Thailand.

⁹³ Prachatham news, "Piroj Polpechr Investigates the Accusations of 'Kathin', Egoistic Strategy of Thai NGOs and Lack of Unity," February 20, 2013, http://www.prachatham.com/detail.htm?code=n6_20022013_01, report on a seminar in Chiang Mai, 16-17 February 2012. (in Thai)

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