

Pak Ing Tai - women's group



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Pak Ing Tai is a small village of around 50 households at the confluence of the Ing and Mekong rivers. It is unusual in that it has very little irrigated rice land – the inhabitants have for a long time depended on the Ing and the Mekong rivers for much of their livelihood, and more recently, off-farm income has become important for the village economy. Pak Ing Tai was particularly hard hit by the floods in 2024, and the community is also very concerned about the impacts on land and water levels by the current government works to reinforce the banks of the Ing river against erosion.

Several members of the community met in the village hall to talk about the background of the village, challenges facing them, the impacts of climate change, and how they had been able to respond and adapt, including their engagement with the SCR project. Three of the four community members present were women, and they told their stories together, both during the meeting, and in walking around the village to look at the immediate environment and at their own landholdings and economic activities.

Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai, Assistant Village Head: Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai said she moved away from the village when she was 16 to work for a logistics company. She came back to Pak Ing Tai in 2553 (2010) for family reasons. Agricultural methods here have changed a lot since she was young, she said. They’re now much more reliant on technology, such as water pumps. Also, there are some strange new diseases occurring. She thinks this could be related to the changes in the environment and particularly all the new chemicals around. “Maybe COVID was caused by chemicals?”

Turning to talk about recovery from last year’s floods, Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai said there had been a lot of damage to be fixed – notably house doors which had been warped and come off their hinges, and a lot of cleaning up to do. Wellbeing was a key issue. Everyone was short of money, she said, and so had to try to reduce expenses as far as possible. They had to be very thrifty; for a long time, they could only buy and trade within the village – they didn’t have cash to buy from the nearby mini-mart, or for any goods from outside the village, she noted. Also, there was no recovery assistance from the government, as this is assessed on the basis of irrigated rice land, which the village does not have. The corn harvest is usually in August/September, she pointed out, and people rely on the income they get from the crop to pay off their debts. The 2024 flood destroyed their whole crop.

People in the village are resilient and used to getting back on their feet after shocks, all the women agreed, but this flood had a real impact on people’s mental health. Some felt panicked as the floods arrived, and then hopeless afterwards.

The floods made people in the village acutely aware of their vulnerability, as they know the floods could definitely recur - they live by the river, and it is “Everything in their life,” they said, but “if there are no more river resources, what will we do?”

They need to look at alternative livelihood strategies, and be adaptable, all of the group agreed. The trip to Tongtum village organised by MFU gave them some insights, including on food processing. They reflected from this on their own resource base, and what they could do with it. Growing cabbages to process could be one option. Also, they pointed out that there is still some more common land in the village not yet in use, and this could be used for some income generating activities by people who don’t have other resources.

Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai spoke about the different trainings enabled by the SCR project.

A lot of what they had learned was about women's role in flood preparedness and response, she said, and also about diverting into alternative livelihood strategies. The main elements were:

- Knowledge of marketing, for their produce, and also use of technology – all of this was focused on optimising their immediate livelihoods, particularly in vegetable cultivation and small livestock raising.
- They had a field trip to Tungtom village, which is in an area with no access to irrigation. The community there has had to develop a whole suite of different livelihood activities, outside the current mainstream, she noted. Also, what she described as really important, how to organise and manage within the community. The Pak Ing Tai people observed both the different activities, and also the way that the village organised and managed. They agreed there were several things they thought could be usefully applied in their community.
- Some specific examples included how to run a chicken-raising cooperative; different types of food processing and preserving methods; and handicrafts. They also learned about different methods of food processing/preservation.

All the women showed examples of the shopping baskets they had learned to make by weaving waste plastic. Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai ran a campaign on this – the purpose of the activity was both to increase women's self-reliance and to reduce waste, she pointed out. She later, privately, said that she was frustrated that she had learned several different options for women to sustainably improve their livelihoods, and run them all by women in the village, but this was the only one they had been interested in pursuing, because “They feel they understood it all from beginning to end. They weren't as confident about the other livelihood strategies they saw.”

She agreed that at least now women knew that there was a whole range of possible livelihood options, and when circumstances changed in the future, they could be keen to diversify further.

Ms Warunee Boonwas:

Ms Warunee Boonwas said that the social structure of the village has changed.

“Young people move out after they've finished Year 12, and don't come back after their tertiary education. It is now mainly older people and young children left in the village. This is a negative effect of the changes.”

“If there were more inputs from the project, the outflow of younger people would not be so big.”

There are more women than men in the village. Ms Narisara Poolsjriwilai and Ms Warunee Boonwas both said that in this community, most men “Marry women quite a bit younger than them, so many women are left as widows in middle age.”

Also, in their opinion, “Because women work more, they are healthier than men.”

All three women agreed that the full extent of women's regular tasks is often invisible, especially to men. There are many different jobs they do every day that a lot of men, and outsiders, just don't register as ‘work’. In the past, before water pumps were installed, women had to haul water from the river, filling large bamboo tubes which they would carry up the bank in baskets on their backs.

The village head agreed that women's work has been invisible to men and outsiders. As well as running their households, they have to fully support their husbands' work, he said, which often includes different types of off-farm employment.

Ms Warunee Boonwas received vegetable seeds from the project as part of the flood recovery assistance. Since then, she has continued growing vegetables for both market and home consumption on a large plot near the centre of the village, which she later proudly showed.

Ms Sopin Intrawong: Ms Sopin Intrawong described herself as a housewife, and said she has always lived in Pak Ing Tai.

"Agriculture here has changed. For thirty years tobacco was the main crop, but now it has been replaced by corn."

She has been growing vegetables for a very long time. For this, she has now started using common land – the area of the riverbank that is exposed when the river level drops from its highest. The vegetable seed provided by the SCR project following last year's floods helped her to re-establish her vegetable growing business quickly, she said. She currently grows eggplants, chillies and snake beans and was delighted to show us her extensive plantings on a large plot of riverbank land.

After last year's flood, the community met with MFU staff to plan recovery strategies, she explained. They agreed that they needed to assert their right to use the common land, which is now under threat from government infrastructure projects. She is really concerned about whether she and others will continue to have access to this common land, as the government is undertaking major works to reinforce the banks of the Ing River, to prevent erosion. The erosion in turn is being caused by the daily release of water from upstream dams. The community is very concerned, she said, first because they think that reinforcing the banks will mean floods will be higher and last longer, and also because it will put a lot of the common land they rely on out of use.

The nearby sluice gates have a big impact [there are now around two dozen sluice gates built in the Ing River basin, and there has been no coordination as to when the water is released], and also recent deforestation, which means there is less absorption by the land. Because of the dams built in China on the Lancang/Mekong, it's not possible to predict water levels the way they could in the past. There have been many discussions about this. The community cannot advocate to the Chinese government, so they have to advocate to the Thai government. The first step they took towards this was participating in the advocacy workshop organised by MFU, where villagers brainstormed and articulated their concerns, and then voiced them directly to senior representatives of the Office of Disaster Preparedness.

The group agreed that the community is deeply worried about the Pak Beng Dam, which is now under construction in Laos, as they believe it will significantly affect the area and further raise water levels in the Mekong River.