

Call for community rights as race for resources accelerates

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | October 31, 2018

UBON RATCHATHANI - Once seen essentially as a development basket case - too dry, too sparse, too remote - the Northeast is becoming a battlefield for industrial expansion as investors are locked in a race for the region's natural resources.

The push for industrial farming, biomass power plants, and the extraction of minerals, gas and oil in the Northeast may carry a high price tag for the environment and local communities, warned speakers at a public forum in Ubon Ratchathani this month.

But with an eye on national elections, academics, activists, and community members believe it is not too late to tackle the region's growing environmental problems and implement policies for sustainable development.



On October 11, in a packed room at the Faculty of Political Science at Ubon Ratchathani University, environmental experts called for sustainable development in the Northeast. The event was co-organized by The Isaan Record and sponsored by Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Snatching up the region's resources

Speaking to an audience of 160 people, Niran Pitakwatchara, a former national human rights commissioner, argued that the current development paradigm enables Thai and foreign investors to snatch up resources in the Northeast.

Under the current regime, the state and private sectors are in full control of the management of natural resources without any meaningful role for the public. This has led to resource grabbing and environmental exhaustion, Mr. Niran noted.

"It is a tragedy of community and environmental rights because it really should be the people of Isaan benefitting [from these resources]," Mr. Niran urged.



Resources of land, forests and water are seen as mere factors of production in the neoliberal world order, Niran Pitakwatchara said in a keynote speech.

Thwarting public participation

The 2017 Minerals Act serves the most recent example of how public participation has taken a backseat in policy-making under the military junta, said Juthamas Srihattapadungkit of the Eco-Culture Study Group.

The new law makes it easier for companies to obtain mining concessions and curbs people's participation through cutting back on the number of mandatory public hearings, Ms. Juthamas told the audience.

One key change in the [new mining legislation](#) is the creation of mineral committees at the provincial level, which also include community representatives. But their disproportionate member ratio will favour the interests of the mining industry, Ms. Juthamas asserted.

“Even when people don’t agree with a mining project, the authorities will have the final say,” Ms. Juthamas said. “They can simply rule that the reasoning [capacity] of the District Administration Organization is insufficient.”

Ms. Juthamas called on communities affected by mining operations to oppose the new law and campaign for an amendment.

Who takes responsibility?

Mining in the Northeast has been highly controversial, in many cases sparking [strong public opposition](#). Locals are often concerned that mines damage farm lands, poison water sources, and make people sick.

[In Loei Province](#), locals reported rashes and stinging eyes, plummeting crop yields, and higher cases of illness after a gold mine started operating nearby in 2006. The test of local water sources by the Ministry of Health found high levels of contaminants. The mining company, however, took no responsibility and claimed that their operations were safe.

In 2017, the military government temporarily suspended all gold mining in the country, citing the impact on public health and the environment. But little has been done to rehabilitate the environment or compensate affected communities in Loei or elsewhere.

This is a common issue with large industrial projects in the region, said Premrudee Daorong, coordinator of [Project SEVANA South-East Asia](#), a regional activism platform based in Bangkok.

“What we are worried the most about is the question of responsibility,” she said, adding that this is an especially critical issue with cross-border investments and foreign-funded industrial projects.

She raised the example of the collapse of a hydroelectric dam under construction in Laos’s Champasak Province in July. The collapse caused widespread destruction, killed many and left thousands homeless.



Environmental issues in the Northeast are linked to the capitalist exploitation of natural resources and unequal power relations between Isaan and the center, argued Premrudee Daorung, coordinator of Project SEVANA South-East Asia.

“Everyone is waiting for the Lao government to investigate, but this isn’t a Lao-owned dam” Ms. Premrudee said. “It is owned by a foreign company.”

The dam was part of a large power project whose main partner is a South Korean firm, but it also involves Laotian and Thai companies.

It should not be difficult to assign responsibility in a clear case like this, Ms. Premrudee argued. But there are hardly any accountability mechanisms when industrial projects go wrong in the region, she noted.

Clean energy’s dirty secret

Another controversial issue discussed at the forum is the environmental and health impact of the growing number of biomass power plants and sugarcane mills in the Northeast.

The government is seeking to reduce the country’s dependence on fossil-based power by converting farm waste into a source of renewable energy. Biomass power plants use organic waste from sugarcane factories, rice mills, and lumber mills to produce electricity.

There are plans to construct 29 new sugarcane mills alongside biomass power plants across the Northeast, according to a study from Khon Kaen University.

But boosting renewable energy production while adding value to the sugar industry comes with a

catch, speakers at the forum noted.

In recent years, biomass power plant operators have struggled to secure a [sufficient supply of organic material](#). The recent boom of sugarcane plantations in the Northeast is seen as directly linked to this rising demand for farm waste.

As sugarcane farmers typically use large amounts of chemical pesticides, [public health experts are concerned](#) about the negative effects on public health and the environment.

Despite the label of “green energy,” studies have found that biomass power plants themselves may cause [air pollution and health problems](#) for [nearby communities](#).



Phipattana Sima, a member of a group opposing the construction of a biomass power plant in Amnat Charoen Province, is concerned that the project will cause environmental damage in the area.

In Amnat Charoen Province, the construction of a large biomass power plant by sugar industry giant Mitr Phol has sparked public protest.

This month, a group of locals opposing the project submitted a petition to Office of the Energy Regulatory Commission, calling for suspension of the project.

At the forum, Phipattana Sima, a member of the group, claimed that the environmental impact assessment of the plant was flawed and locals had not been given a chance to voice their opinions.

How to move forward

A step towards a solution to the environmental challenges of development in the Northeast has to start from strengthening the people's sector, speakers argued.

Ms. Premrudee noted that development in the region is not only damaging the environment but is also creating economic dependencies among the population.

"If you are drowning in debt, it's very difficult to fight," she said referring to the high level of household debt in the Northeast.

Ms. Premrudee believes that education and the strengthening the local economy will increase people's bargaining power so that they can take on an active role in determining the fate of their region.

Mr. Niran called on the government to finally recognize the concept of community rights in legislation and policy-making. Small-scale farmers must have guaranteed access to the resources of land, forests, and water.

Development can only be sustainable if power is decentralized and people have the right to participate, Mr. Niran urged.

"Community rights ensure participation in resources management," Mr. Niran said. "Together, the people, the state, and the private sector can make sustainable development happen."