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Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference 1998

The grassroots movement for change in Thailand and the Assembly of the Poor

Sunday 5 November 2006, by [PRASARTSET Suthy](#) (Date first published: 11 April 1998).

This talk was presented to the Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference, April 10-13, Sydney, by Professor Suthy Prasartset, adviser to the Forum [Assembly] of the Poor, Vice-chairperson for the Campaign for Popular Democracy.

The Forum of the Poor is a common platform of oppressed people who share the same faith: most are affected by the policy of 'development aggression' committed in the name of national development'' imposed/manipulated by either the state or private sector. It is also a venue for mutual learning and exchanges of ideas and experiences among grassroots people towards a resolution of their problems at both local and structural levels.

The Forum of the Poor was established on December 10, 1995 at the regional meeting of the poor people's organisations and networks from 10 countries at Thammasat University in Bangkok, Thailand. This occasion was to mark the International Human Rights Day as well as Thai Constitution Day. Later, the conference converged at Khong Chiam district, in Ubol Ratchathanee province of Thailand, where a mega dam is being constructed.

The Pak Mool Declaration'' was adopted unanimously as the common concern of all participants. The conference reached a consensus to set up a network of people's organisations to pursue their collective struggle for legitimate rights and social justice. Basically, the Forum of the Poor comprises four main groups: villagers affected by the dam construction/mega-development projects, villagers affected by land eviction/displacement (land and forest), slum dwellers and workers affected by industrial hazards and occupational diseases. The first public appearance of the Forum was during the ASEAN summit when a thousand participants from the Forum joined with workers and other slum dwellers in a rally before the ASEAN leaders during their summit on December 15, 1995. The Forum of the Poor submitted the statement to the ASEAN leaders to seriously discuss the issues of poverty, human rights and social development rather than concentrate only on trade liberalisation and investment. However, the police and security tried to block the rally and the Forum of the Poor was not able to submit the statement directly to the ASEAN leaders. However, with the support of the mass media, the issues raised by Forum of the Poor were publicised widely. It became the new social/grassroots movement in the region that attracted the public's attention. Forum of the Poor has both the local, national and international aspects. Therefore, their action is aimed at both the Thai government and ASEAN governments. In February 1996, Forum of the Poor launched another collective action taking

the opportunity of the Asia Europe Meeting Summit (ASEM) and the NGO parallel forum to voice their position and demands. Thousands of members from the Forum of the Poor held a rally in front of the government house and attempted to submit their position to the ASEM Meeting together with the NGOs' forum. In order to reflect the same meaning with the local name Samaccha Khon Jon'', an English name was introduced and so Assembly of the Poor'' was used during this period.

As a local movement, the Forum/Assembly of the Poor organised three rallies in the last 24 months: The first one took place from March 25 to April 23, 1996 in front of the Government House. Some 12,000 participants from 20 provinces presented 47 issues to the government. The issues were grouped into four problems -- forest and land, dam, impact from the huge projects of the government and patients from industrial hazards. The rally lasted 28 days and the cabinet agreed to solve all the problems. One important point is that the Assembly of the Poor adopted the peaceful and non-violent approach which is very much welcomed by the public. The mass media played a supportive role in clarifying the reasons of the rally and the Assembly received a lot of sympathy and support. The second rally took place from October 14 to November 6, 1996. After the April rally, the Assembly of the Poor followed all the issues to be resolved by the authorities closely. Since there are still many issues that the local officials didn't take action on as agreed, a resolution was delayed. In September 1996, then Prime Minister (Banham Silpa-archa) dissolved the parliament and the authorities stopped trying to solve the problems. The Assembly of the Poor then organised another mobilisation to put pressure on the government to keep its promise and solve the problems it has created. The third rally took place from January 25 to May 6, 1997. It demanded the new government be sincere in solving the problems of the poor. This time, there were about 10,000 participants and the action lasted 99 days -- the longest rally ever to be experienced in this country. The problems presented to the government became 121 issues from six main groups: slum dwellers, impact from government mega-Projects, alternative agriculture, forest and land, dams, patients affected by the industrial hazardous. The cabinet agreed to solve all the problems raised and set up 10 committees to follow these up.

The process and spirit of the Forum (Assembly) of the Poor is being promoted in other countries and regions. There is a strong need for a region-wide coalition among the people who are affected by "development aggression" and the disaster that is called globalisation. This important work is still being undertaken. At the moment, Assembly of The Poor has networks in the Philippines, Malaysia, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Japan. The Assembly of the Poor has recently joined the Via Campesina (a world peasant movement) and a representative was elected as the International Coordinating Committee for Southeast and East Asia. Now, it is hosting the Asian Secretariat of Via Campesina in Bangkok. This global alliance provides a great opportunity for the Assembly of the Poor to collaborate with other fraternal movements. The Asian Cultural Forum on Development (ACFOD) has committed itself to continue to facilitate the Assembly of the Poor at the regional and international levels.

Program of Action/Activities

- Negotiation: Continue to negotiate with state authorities on the impact of development and development policies, as well as on the right of people to manage natural resources.
- Training and workshops: To build the capacity of the organisation both locally and regionally. Civic education is one of the

important activities to boost people's morale and understanding of various social, economic and political issues. The resource persons from various professions such as academics, journalists, lawyers, social development workers and human rights activists were invited to give a lecture at the rally named as "Village of the Poor".

Alliance building: People's exchanges (local and regional)

- Publications and Resource Centre
- International Meeting (2nd Forum of the Poor — tentatively to be held in October, 1998)
- Secretariat: coordination and services

A vision for the future

The Forum for the Poor promotes grassroots participatory democracy and solidarity. It is committed to the people-centred development and peaceful struggle against development aggression.

The Assembly of the Poor don't believe that economic growth will be genuinely benefit the people since it is no guarantee the just distribution of wealth, income and resources.

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