

The “Gap” between the reality of daily activities at rural communities in Northeastern Thailand and the awareness of external activists

Rie WATANABE

1 . *Keyword: Northeastern Thailand, Regional Development, Involvement of External Activists, Reality of Rural Community*

1. Purpose and Background of the Research

Rural communities in developing countries such as Asia and Africa, affected by a rapid urbanization and information technology, have come to engage with external societies in more various aspects. Under these circumstances, regional development is required to cope with a variety of situations and needs in order to eliminate poverty and secure human safety. Previously, the main method to support regional development had been top-down approach by governments and development assistance agencies of foreign countries. However, such support often failed to obtain residents’ understanding and were sometimes pointed out that they further environmental destruction and pollution. Reviewing this failure, bottom-up approach which tries to respect residents’ will at its maximum has attracted certain attention. This trend eventually led to grass-root activities and supporting activities which require residents’ participation.

Supporting regional development brings interaction between local residents and external activists. On the other hand, we can view it as a chance to improve peoples’ living standard and security by providing new ways of thinking and technologies to rural communities. It is necessary to ensure that support of regional development, whoever may lead it, is consistent with residents’ needs.

It is pointed out that support activities which do not meet residents’ needs might possibly bring undesirable change by producing mutual distrust and a sense of unfairness. However, we see many support activities that are still based on top-down approach or only complete formal requirements, even if they emphasize residents’ participation.

At rural communities in Northeastern Thailand where I carried out a research, I recognized incompatibility or a “gap” between support activities by external activists and residents’ needs. I studied the cause of this gap and measures to get over it, while doing research on daily life and activities of local residents.

2. Field Research in Northeastern Thailand

In Northeastern Thailand, approximately half of its population are engaged with agriculture, that makes the income level of this region the lowest in Thailand. Previously, this situation was thought to be caused by the fact that they operate unstable agriculture with low-productivity which relies on natural rainfall. In order to eliminate poverty, stable agriculture with improved productivity that would be realized through irrigation was deemed to be essential and residents were also estimated to think the same way. Nevertheless, in the district six of Don Village, Kohksamlaam District, Banhead City, Khonkaen Prefecture, local residents have a slim interest on irrigation and rarely use it even if irrigation project is being carried out by a Japanese foundation. In order to observe work of external activists from the viewpoint of resident, I stayed at local family from April to June and from October to November 2005 and did a research on daily life and activities. Also, I visited all 117 families which are engaged with agriculture in the district six and surveyed their family members, daily activities, revenues, and etc. through inquiries.

3. The Findings and The Analysis

(1) Local residents have evaded risks involved in unstable agriculture by seeking for non-agricultural revenue. Today, they rely less on agriculture than they used to. On the other hand, external activists focused on efforts to improve agriculture. The project being continued with the fundamental gap, they couldn’t win understanding and cooperation from local residents.

(2) The “Gap” always exists. External activists need to understand and honestly modify the gap between support activities and local needs.