

Demographic Behaviour Responses to Poverty: Findings from the Participatory Poverty Assessment of Thailand

Sirirat Taneerananon*
Prince of Songkla University
Hat Yai, Thailand 90112
sirirat.ta@psu.ac.th

The paper was based on the data that derived from the Participatory Poverty Assessment of Thailand, funded by the Asian Development bank from August 2001 to August 2002. The study was conducted on a nationwide basis covering six regions of Thailand. The objectives were to carry out a comprehensive assessment of poverty, including its causes and impacts; to assess the responses of the government and other agencies in addressing the needs of the poor and to recommend policies for the government to best address the needs of the poor. The methodology used was qualitative approach with emphasis on focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and observation-participation. The six regions were the north, the south, the northeast, the central, Bangkok Metropolis and Bangkok Vicinity. The study sites of each region were selected purposively and divided between rural and urban areas. Three provinces were selected for each region. In each province, one to two urban communities and one to two villages were selected. The conceptual framework used for the study was the multidimensional nature of poverty of the United Nations (Human Development Report 1997).

In the study, the poor were asked to give the meaning of poverty in their opinion. This question was kept to the last section of the focus group discussion after all other questions had been asked. As the question appeared too difficult for the poor to define especially at the beginning of the session when rapport between the poor and the researchers had not yet been established. The poor both in rural and urban areas defined the meaning of poverty in three major aspects: poverty was hardship, insufficiency and inferiority. They had hardship in earning a living. They had insufficient resources like capital and equipments. They had less capabilities and skills to compete and earn more. They lacked opportunities in life.

To understand the demographic behaviour responses to poverty, it is important to realize the causes of poverty in Thailand as seen from the poor. In their perspectives, the causes of poverty were the lack of landownership, lack of capital, education and skills, debts, irregular employment, large families, aging and sickness and uncontrollable outside forces.

Paper presented at the IUSSP XXV International Population Conference, Tours, France, 18-23 July 2005
*Associate Professor of Sociology, Faculty of liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University

The lack of land ownership among the poor or if the poor do own land, the plot of land is usually too small to cultivate or to produce more. There is also limited land availability for the poor to occupy. The poor believed that if there is more land, the productivity could increase. Thus, they will earn more. The rural poor in Thailand especially the poor in the north, the northeast and the central regions put a lot of emphasis on rice farming. Rice farming was their livelihood; it is their way of life. The people will feel poor if they have not grown enough rice to eat. Thus, land ownership is very important to their lives.

“I am poor because I have no land, no one to support, no children”

(A woman, 74, no children, no job, Sakaeo, the northeast)

“Poor because I have small plots of land, the production is very small”

(A farmer, 49, Sri Saket, the northeast)

The poor believed that the lack of land was a result of no inheritance from the ancestors. As in the past, the land inheritance was assigned through the feudal system. In Thai society, land meant social and economic status. The lack of land among the poor, especially farmers, made poverty pass on from one generation to the next.

Another cause of poverty was the lack of capital (money) to invest or to buy equipments to earn a living. The lack of capital causes them to borrow money and debts have been the cause and effect of the increase of poverty. With the lack of capital, came the lack of education and skills that are necessary to earn a decent living and enable the poor to get out of poverty especially it meant better lives for the young generation.

“If I am educated, if I got secondary level grade 3, I can get factory job and earn 100 bahts a day, everyday. But I cannot work everyday, cause I have no qualification for the job.”

(A widow 35, one child, general labourer, Sa Kaeo, the northeast)

Without proper education and skills, the poor cannot get regular jobs thus regular income. The majority of the poor usually are general labourers in the agricultural and informal sectors. It is meant that the poor are employed on a daily basis, with no guarantee and no welfare.

“Hard life, no regular jobs, no money to send children to school”

(A woman, 60, prawn peeler, Pattani, the south)

One cause of poverty realized by the poor is having large families to feed. However, figures do indicated that contraceptive used among the poor were not so prevalent. Among the fishermen in the south of Thailand, less than fifty percent used birth controls.

“Too many children to feed. Have to pay for their schooling. My own expense is at least 300 bahts a day. I work as labourer. Some day I get job, some day I don’t. I am poor, don’t know what to do.”

(A man 57, general labourer, Nakorn Si Thammarat, the south)

Old age and poor health became one major cause of poverty especially when the poor rely on the physical strength to earn their living and their employment was on a daily basis. It means that the older they are the poorer they become. It is apparent that sickness in the poor family fell hard burden on the poor themselves. It is even harder for the elderly poor people who do not have children or spouse to rely on. At present, the state of social welfare in Thailand for the aged and the sick are not equal to those in the developed countries.

Working on a daily basis meant that when one is ill, one cannot afford to take time off to see the doctor or to visit hospital which could have meant prevention rather than cure for a lot of diseases and prolonged illness. The Ultra poor study of Thailand has shown that in a poor family, there usually is one chronologically ill member to look after (Ultra Poor Study, 2000).

“When we get sick we go to a clinic. It is quicker than going to the hospital where we have to spend half a day and have to miss our job”

(A 43 years old housewife from an inner city in Sakon Nakorn, the northeast)

One major cause of poverty is the uncontrollable outside forces such as the price fluctuation, the downturn of the economy, the increasing cost of living, the depletion of the bountiful natural resources, the change of climate, the droughts and pests. In the south of Thailand, when rubber price fell in November 2001 from 22-25 bahts a kilo to 13 bahts, the farmers earned only half of what they used to earn. The fell of rubber price caused sudden poverty among the rubber planters.

Since the study had found out from the poor what the causes of poverty seen from their own perspectives, further question, which yield data for this paper, was to ask them about the impacts poverty had on their lives.

It was found that one important way as demographic behaviour responses to poverty for the poor in Thailand was to migrate to work in the cities or urban areas or in the case of Pattani in the south of Thailand to migrate temporarily across the border to neighboring Malaysia to work as temporary workers and send remittances home. For those who migrated are the young members of the family, sons as well as daughters. However, some households indicated that they would have preferred to work in the rural areas, had there been employment or factories set up by the government in the areas. As they did not want to go far away from home especially when labour was still needed for farm work and for looking after the elderly members of the households. In the case of young girls, there was higher risk of them ending up being prostitutes with or without

their consent. Also, having migrated to the cities and gained experience from the urban life, had made it difficult for some to return home and carry on the farm work. Some had even stopped sending remittance that was the primary reason of their migration. Some migrants stopped visiting the families or left behind some burden such as young children for their poor parents to look after without providing the resources for them. These children are growing up amidst poverty like their parents. It is perpetuating the vicious circle.

Migration to the urban areas also causes desertion and family breakups and divorce among the poor. It was common practice that men acquired new wives and stopped sending remittances home to the family they left behind. The female-headed families became an increasing phenomenon. The poor women with responsibility of small children to look after and no proper skills nor qualification always find it difficult to obtain good jobs or earn enough living. Sometimes, the women became widowed due to premature death of the husbands who migrated and took risky dangerous jobs like construction or fishery. Life became harder when there was an elderly member of the family to look after. Values regarding gender roles in Thai society, that place a lot of responsibilities on women to be dutiful as wife and daughter, made the lives of many poor women both in rural and urban areas become more miserable. Moreover, low and irregular income had consequences on the health and illness of the poor families. Heavy debts combined with health expenses for the member of the poor household resulted in further debts and became like a vicious circle the poor can never get out of.

One policy recommended which is relevant to the demographic effects of poverty is to strengthen the community by creating local employment to prevent migration. The local employment will generate more jobs for the poor, more income and better family life. It means husband and wife will be together to work, to raise children, to look after the elderly. Consequently, the burdens on the women to cope with household responsibilities will be lessened. Another recommendation is that social values in Thai society regarding gender roles should be reexamined to lighten the burdens that caused the plight on the women especially those in poverty.

References

United Nations 1997 *Human Development Report*. Oxford University Press.

Taneerananon Sirirat, Dolmanach Baka, Sussangkornkarn Chalongphob (1995) *Thai Muslims and Their Participation in the Socio-Economic Development Process: A Study of Southern Thailand*. Thailand Development Research Institute

Taneerananon Sirirat, Raungsong Rompo, Thongruang Chakri (2000) *A Study of the Ultra Poor in Southern Thailand*. Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand. Supported by Thailand Research Fund

Taneerananon Sirirat et al. (2003) *Participatory Assessment of Poverty in Thailand*. Research Report submitted to the Asian Development Bank.