
Thailand: A step forward in the resolution of a conflict

A conflict exists in Northern Thailand between certain groups of highland and lowland people over the use of natural resources. Many lowlanders accuse some highland minority groups of affecting their water supplies as a result of unsustainable agricultural practices which lead to deforestation, which itself is said to decrease water supply and increase sedimentation of watercourses due to soil erosion. The solution put forward: removal of the minority groups from the area. This being obviously unacceptable to the latter, the conflict has persisted for several years.

With the aim of achieving equitable solutions to the problem, a number of organizations --including the World Rainforest Movement -- organized an international symposium in March in Chiang Mai. Participants included international experts in watershed management and protected areas, as well as representatives from the Royal Forestry Department, government officials, academics, conservationists and local peoples organizations. Once the symposium was over, the participants were able to visit one area in which conflict has occurred and to hear the viewpoints of both highland and the lowland people.

The main achievement of the meeting was to open up a space for discussion of the different viewpoints and to bring to the debate experiences from other countries as well as the results of new research. The symposium concluded that the problem was not as simple as it had first appeared to be to some lowland groups and that therefore the solution could not be a simplistic one.

From the visit to the conflict area we reached the following conclusions:

- 1) Soil erosion in the mountain area does constitute a major problem for downstream water users, but the major cause of erosion appears not to be deforestation but a badly- built road system.
- 2) Part of the problem in mountain areas has been the forced resettlement of peoples who used to carry out sustainable shifting agriculture practices but are now confined to carrying out permanent cultivation, which does entail some environmental impacts.
- 3) Water usage, particularly by lowlanders, has dramatically increased as a result of the expansion of cash crop cultivation and large-scale fruit orchards for export in the lowlands. The water shortages experienced by downstream users during the past years are to a large extent attributable to this increased lowland agricultural use.
- 4) A number of dams have been built along the lower reaches of the river tributary system in question and many irrigation canals divert the water, which has an impact on water supplies in downstream areas.

What is thus clear is that even if the hill people were removed from their homes, this unfair solution would not solve the problem. It is therefore necessary to continue efforts to bring people together and to facilitate a process for the achievement of true and equitable solutions to an issue which is creating problems to both lowlanders and highlanders. We sincerely hope that the recently held international

symposium will mean a step forward in that direction.

By: WRM International Secretariat