

Human-Scale Economics: Poverty Reduction in North-eastern Thailand

Joel D. Moore, Monash University Malaysia

John A. Donaldson, Singapore Management University

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Under what conditions is economic growth beneficial for the poor? There is widespread agreement among development experts, economists, and policy makers that expanding the amount of economic activity in any economy has the potential to reduce poverty (Kanbur 2001). Where this consensus breaks down, however, is on the question of how certain this connection is. A number of economists and even policy makers have argued that economic growth can be generally assumed to benefit the poor through mechanisms such as trickling down and growth poles (e.g., Bhagwati 1985; Krueger 1995; Dollar and Kraay 2002; Spence 2008). As long as economic output is increasing, members of all income bands will benefit. This argument has received substantial criticism from both mainstream and critical economists on both methodological and theoretical grounds (e.g., Weisbrot 2000; Eastwood & Lipton 2000; Rodrik 2000; Ravallion 2005).

In addition to directly criticizing the purported relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction, more effort could be spent examining exceptions to this relationship. Some economies see poverty reduction despite slower growth; others grow quickly but experience little reduction in poverty rates. The former have the potential to

provide insights as to how to make economic growth better for the poor. The latter might tell us more about what policies or factors could be avoided or mitigated in order to make growth better for the poor. Thus examining *exceptions* to the hypothesized relationship between growth and poverty reduction can be insightful. However, economic changes are difficult to assess. Numerous factors – and not just manmade ones – drive patterns of economic growth and poverty reduction. We can control for factors that are less uniquely important to poverty reduction by carefully comparing two economies that are similar in most respects but that defy the hypothesized connection between economic growth and poverty reduction, one with more rapid poverty reduction but slower growth and one with slower poverty reduction but more rapid growth.

This is the approach that we adopt in this paper. Here, we employ a most similar systems, different outcomes research design (Lijphart 1971; Bennett George 2004) by comparing the experiences of two neighbouring provinces in north-eastern Thailand that have had sharply contrasting and unexpected records in reducing poverty despite similar growth trajectories. The causes of poverty are legion and interconnected - in addition to social forces, geography, and demography, even the weather natural climate can play important roles. How do we sort out which of these variables is crucial in reducing poverty beyond what can be explained by economic growth alone? By focusing on two similar provinces in rural Thailand that have seen radically different poverty reduction trajectories despite similar levels of GDP growth, we control for and exclude a number of alternative explanations for the observed changes. First, both of the selected provinces share the same overall national policy framework. Thailand has a unitary government, with policy directed by the centre and administered through a national bureaucracy (Mutebi 2004). Despite decentralization starting in the 1990s,

provincial administration remains highly constrained; provincial officials are considered agents of the central government are expected to implement national policy faithfully. Such leaders enjoy a very low degree of autonomy. Second, the two provinces neighbour one another and enjoy similar demographic, geographic, and environmental strengths and challenges. Third, both started the period under investigation with similar proportions of the population living in poverty. Yet, in spite of these similarities, one saw rapid poverty reduction despite a brisk but slower rate of growth, while the other experienced one of the lowest rates of poverty in the region, despite its more rapid pace of economic development.

As mentioned, the patterns of economic growth and poverty reduction in these two neighbouring north-eastern Thai provinces represent a puzzling anomaly for the literature linking growth with poverty reduction. Between 2000 and 2010, Si-Saket experienced an average GDP per capita growth rate of 13.4 per cent per year while its poverty rate dropped only a modest amount, from 62.2 per cent to 55.9 per cent (NESDB 2012; NESDB 2012b). Meanwhile, the poverty rate in Surin province fell a startling 56.3 percentage points, declining 73.8 per cent to 17.5 per cent in the same period despite having a lower (though still heady) average growth rate of 10.7 per cent (NESDB 2012; NESDB 2012b). Figure 1 displays the divergent poverty patterns experienced by the two provinces, despite parallel growth trajectories. Here, we focus on Surin's case because of its astonishing success. Si-Saket, being just the most extreme of what was generally true of Isan's provinces, is used primarily for comparison purposes.

-- Insert Figure 1 about here --

In this paper, we argue that three factors were important to understanding Surin's surprising pace of poverty reduction. First, a strong network of activists in Surin helped to ensure that national policies designed to help poor farmers and other rural

residents were implemented locally in a way as to achieve poverty reduction, rather than political patronage, goals. Second, Surin's unusually proactive governor, appointed by the Thaksin administration, was especially supportive of these policies. Third, the decentralization that occurred at the time empowered Tambon (sub-district) governments in a way that allowed local officials to implement central-level policies especially vigorously. The combined efforts of policy makers and civil society leaders lead to poverty reduction by ensuring that poor farmers and others were able to take advantage of the growth generated by a number of small-scale productive activities, including organic rice production, handicrafts through the OTOP program, and local rural-based tourism. These industries – small in scale and low in technology – generated growth, though not as much as that generated by higher-tech, larger-scale industrialization. Yet, these were designed in such a way as to allow the participation of low-income local residents – though they were less productive, a higher proportion of the income derived from these initiatives wound up in the pocket of the poor. To be sure, initiatives such as OTOP and organic rice were implemented in many regions. Why were they especially effective in reducing poverty in Surin but not elsewhere? As mentioned, it was the province's strong network of civil society and committed local political leaders that ensured these programs' success. See Figure 2 for a graphical statement of this argument.

-- Insert Figure 2 about here --

In this paper, we detail this argument by first reviewing the potential pathways to poverty reduction that emerge from research from a number of disciplines. Second, we set the context for examining the two provinces by detailing Thailand's struggle with rural poverty over the past few decades. Third, we analyse the specific factors that we argue explain this puzzle, and trace the causal connections between the variables. The

final section concludes with some insights useful for understanding the complex relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction.

Part I: Reviewing the Pathways to Poverty Reduction

Research from a variety of disciplines has a large number of explanations of and potential pathways to poverty reduction. First, a number of scholars focus on economic growth as the prime mover of poverty reduction. These scholars are further divided into a number of camps, including those who prescribe pro-market policies (Bhagwati 1985; Lal Myint 1995; Dollar Kraay 2002); those who advocate import-substitution as a path to industrialization (Frank 1969; Dos Santos 1970); as well as those who argue that a developmental state works best for stimulating the type of growth that effectively reduces poverty (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1996). Each of these argue or simply assert that while economic growth is beneficial in its own terms, following the particular paths to growth they advocate ensures that the economic growth that is generated will directly and indirectly help reduce poverty. Second, a large group of scholars are more critical of the pursuit of economic growth (Seers 1973; Streeten 1993), arguing, for instance, that the rapid promotion of development and economic growth actually perpetuates poverty (Escobar 1995), or creates an unsustainable threat to the environment or to the Earth's supply of natural resources (Meadows et al, 2004). Third, still others argue that effort in empowering poor people to fight for their own livelihoods would be more effective than pursuing growth (Chambers 1987; Mehrotra 1997). Finally, other scholars seek a middle ground, contending that while economic growth is necessary, it is not sufficient for poverty reduction. Deemphasizing economic growth somewhat in order to focus on human-scale development helps to promote the kind of growth that directly reduces poverty (Schumacher 1973; Max-Neef 1991). Each of these pathways are purported to

reduce poverty. While some of these pathways are driven by growth, each also expects to see additional poverty reduction independent of economic growth.

Focusing on exceptions to the purported relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction allows us to adjudicate some of these debates. It allows us to ask: what factors besides growth have caused poverty rates to decline, as well as what factors block economic growth from benefitting the poor. While focusing on exceptions does not undermine the original hypothesized relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction, it can provide evidence that can be used to illuminate new pathways to reduce the deprivation that remains a scourge to humanity. Previous attempts to analyse poverty in way have focused on the national level or on countries that have devolved substantial responsibilities to regional governments. By examining a unity state, this study provides a more difficult test for understanding how local political, economic and social factors can reduce poverty despite political constraints.

This kind of research is best done in a country that has experienced at least some, though varying levels of, poverty reduction. For its part, Thailand has had an impressive record of economic growth. According to World Bank (2014) sources, GDP per capita grew from \$436.6 (2005 dollars) in 1965 to \$3,163.9 in 2010. This economic growth coincided with a dramatic drop in the proportion of the Thai population living below the national poverty line, from 65.3 per cent in 1988 to 16.9 per cent in 2010. As expected, this poverty reduction has not been experienced uniformly throughout the country. As with many other developing countries, poverty declined fastest in the capital and major industrial areas.

Yet, the land-locked rural north-eastern region of Thailand, known as Isan, remained quite poor at the turn of the twenty-first century, with 59.5 per cent of the population remaining below the national poverty line, calculated using a spatial index

that evaluates the cost of a basket of essential food and non-food items (NESDB 2012). For farmers living in the Isan periphery, economic and political life was traditionally centred on the village, with most of the population practicing subsistence agriculture. The central government and national and international markets were remote and disengaged. As transportation and communication improved throughout the kingdom, market relations gradually competed with communal relations and the national government sought more influence on and loyalty from farmers across Isan. Community institutions to safeguard against extreme poverty gradually eroded as increasing numbers of young, able villagers migrated to work in Bangkok, eschewed reciprocal labour arrangements for market-based ones, and sought quick cash from moneylenders instead of village-based group savings schemes (Sheigetomi, 1992). Additionally, the traditional practice of households supplementing nutrition sources with mushrooms and vegetables from communally managed forest areas was gradually threatened by government and private initiatives to grow water-hogging eucalyptus as a cash crop in these areas (Barua 2011, p. 180).

Thailand's stubborn rural poverty created the conditions for a fundamental change in central politics. In 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party swept into power in Thailand, thanks to a new set of electoral rules, substantial personal wealth, and a political campaign that mobilized several key demographic groups. Over the next five years, the support of the rural poor became increasingly critical to the expanding power of the Thaksin administration. Not coincidentally, the Thaksin government pursued a variety of policies that were designed to maintain the political support of this group, including a debt moratorium for small holding farmers, the One Tambon One

Product (OTOP) scheme, the Village Fund, the Health Security for All initiative, the New Entrepreneur Promotion program, and various other poverty reduction projects.¹

As a result of these controversial policies, poverty rates in rural Isan did decline. The proportion of the Thai population living in poverty (based on expenditure) declined from 42.6 per cent in 2000 to 16.9 per cent in 2010. The proportion of Thais living in poverty in Isan declined from 59.5 to 26 per cent in the same period (NESDB 2012). Part of this reduction could be attributed to economic growth: Thailand's GDP grew by an average of 5.7 per cent per year, while the corresponding Gross Regional Product of Isan grew by an average of 4.2 per cent per year in this period (World Bank, 2012; NESDB 2012b). Yet this reduction did not occur uniformly across north-eastern Thailand. Over this period, two provinces experienced markedly different poverty reduction outcomes despite quite similar economic growth rates, as we noted above.

Part II: Scaling up the small-scale: Surin's micro-oriented projects

In addition to having similar rates of economic growth and starting under similar conditions, we can eliminate a number of factors because they were similar in both provinces. The provinces had similar populations, levels of urbanization, and industrialization. If these factors could not explain the differences in the rates of poverty reduction in the two provinces, what factors can?

¹ Organic and tourism were not emphasized on the national agenda in the same way as the other policies were. The central government was not hostile to these initiatives, however. Moreover, with the success of organic agriculture in Surin and a few other places, the Thaksin Administration considered making these more of a national priority, though it never was emphasized in the same way.

-- Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here --

Much of the increase in income in Surin was through diversifying out of agriculture. Tables 1 and 2 suggest this occurred in Surin to a much greater extent than Si-Saket. Unfortunately, we lack disaggregated data that would reveal accurately the specific source of these wages and profits. Yet, it is clear that micro-oriented development projects have thrived in Surin province in this period: cooperative organic rice production and One Tambon One Product (OTOP). One of these augmented agricultural incomes; the other grew non-agricultural income sources within the rural economy. Below, we trace the processes that have allowed these three factors to benefit poorer farmers in Surin.

1) *Organic Rice Production*

Rice production has long been the chief agricultural activity in Thailand. With a substantial land frontier lasting up until the 1970s, families were able move and establish their own rice farms with relative ease (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014, p. 159; Ingram, 1955, p. 79). As better roads and infrastructure improved pathways to the national and export markets, small-scale farmers started adopting new farming practices including the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Because of the capital requirements involved in this new method of farming, small-scale farmers frequently turned to formal and informal credit markets to secure the money required to purchase seeds and chemicals. Many have argued both in Thailand and in other developing countries that the supply of sufficient credit is crucial for poverty reduction among small, poor farmers (e.g., Braverman 1986; Smith 2005). Formal banks and even government provided programs often consider it prohibitively expensive to assess the credit and lend to widely-flung small farmers. Collection is expensive, and these entities often lack the kind of social capital needed to ensure repayment. The highly variable

nature of agricultural commodity prices is such that farmers borrow money to finance these investments sometimes have difficulty in paying the loans off. A bad crop year, floods, or declining global prices can cause a farmer to become hopelessly indebted, particularly when farmers only have access to informal moneylenders who charge extremely high interest rates (Aleem 1993). As farmland is often used to secure these debts, indebted farmers face losing their land - their main source of livelihood - due to factors over which they often have little control.

For many Thai farmers, shifting to organic farming presents an opportunity to break this vicious cycle. Because effective organic farming requires farmers to employ natural agricultural processes in order to ensure the ground is fertile and free of pests, farmers do not have to make the same scale of investments at the start of each growing season ('Freedom Farmers Rediscover Food Security,' 2005). Organic farming allows agriculturalists to shift what had been subsistence grain production into a cash crop - one with high international demand yet low cost in terms of inputs. Organic farming upgrades production, even as it leverages farmers experience with traditional agricultural practices. Small farmers almost invariably need help from larger actors from business, government or society that can provide links to overseas markets.

As a result, much of Isan's farmers shifted to organic rice. While production of organic jasmine rice increased in many rural provinces in Isan during this period, the results in Surin province have been astounding. As Table 3 displays, Surin province produces the most jasmine organic rice in Thailand, with nearly double the output of Si-Saket. As of 2006, 12,584 producers are involved in organic rice production in Surin (Patrawart 2009, p.257). By themselves, Surin's organic rice producers represent nearly half of Isan's producers, about 40 per cent of the region's production, and one-quarter of its exports. With so many producers directly engaged in organic farming and more

employed in supporting industries, this represents a major boon to small farmers in the province.

-- Insert Table 3 about here --

Not only have Surin producers been able to increase their production of more lucrative organic rice, they have managed to develop an internationally recognized brand. This required overcoming collective action problems associated with developing strong quality control mechanisms and achieving sufficient quality. Through their efforts, Surin Hom Mali Organic Jasmine Rice has emerged as a globally known brand of quality organic rice, with over 400 tons exported in 2006.

2) One Tambon One Product

Second, Surin did especially well in one central government initiative intended to spark local handicrafts and provide alternative incomes for low-income farmers. One Tambon One Product (OTOP) is a micro-development initiative implemented by the Thai national government, based on the Japanese One Village One Product scheme. Under this policy, local producers can register their products with a government agency. Producers from each sub district (Tambon) are rated on their ability to generate spill over effects in the local economy, product marketability, and production capacity. Importantly, to achieve a high rating, producers must demonstrate a distinct provincial identity, the use of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom, the use of local raw materials and labour, a contribution to knowledge transformation and diffusion in the community, and the preservation of local culture and traditions. All of these have the potential to undermine the causes of poverty.

The highest rated producers are rewarded with product promotion, grants, loans, and assistance facilitating export. As of 2008 over 1.3 million members and employees nationwide worked in 37,840 OTOP producers, enjoying increases in household income.

About two-thirds of all OTOP producers were community-based enterprises, according to 2010 statistics (Natsuda et al., 2012, p. 376). A number of complementary government-organized micro-credit financing programs, including the Village Development Fund, the People's Bank Program, and the Bank for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, were established around the same time, permitting farmers with access to loans to get their OTOP ventures started.

Proponents argue that the program helps farmers in many ways. First, subsistence farmers can supplement their incomes by engaging in production piecemeal for an existing producer or cooperative. Second, enterprising individuals or families are able to establish their own operations locally, an alternative to the costly and risk step of moving to the city in search of opportunity. This leads to more direct benefits to the local economy, as well as less social dislocation in the community and the preservation of village institutions geared towards helping the poor. Third, relatedly, these local institutions facilitate the development of social capital as producers share techniques, marketing strategies, and resources. Since the bulk of the OTOP products were at least in part developed from traditional practices and techniques, the program has the potential to provide segments of society who would otherwise be disadvantaged in integrating into the market economy.

On the other hand, critics highlight a number of flaws of the OTOP program. One common criticism has been that the government did not effectively target the poor with these efforts. Indeed, it is unlikely that the poorest in society - the severely disabled for instance - would be in a position to start such an entrepreneurial venture. Many cases have been identified where already successful businesses made use of OTOP resources, watering down the program's impact on poverty reduction (Phadungkiati 2010, p.51). Some critics suggest that the Thaksin administration did not better target the poor

because either the prime minister was more interested in keeping the rural poor politically dependent on his party or he was more concerned about using the program as a part of a fiscal stimulus designed to help the country to recover from the East Asian Economic Crisis. Second and related, the successes of early movers were undermined as other entrepreneurs and villagers mimicked their strategies and products, leading to an oversupply of some products and a decline in their market value (Natsuda, Kaoru, et al. 2012 p.375). Third, the post-Thaksin military and Democratic Party-led governments were not enthusiastic promoters of OTOP, further limiting the program's impact during later years.

However, the impact of the OTOP program has been insufficiently researched. Most studies of OTOP have either examined a few districts or sub-districts in great detail or made generalizations based on aggregate patterns across the country. For instance, Kurokawa et. al. (2010) found that the majority of OTOP members surveyed in Khon Kaen province evaluated the effectiveness of OTOP positively and three quarters of respondents evaluated it positively in rural Sakhon Nakon province, where poverty is higher. A review of Chiang Mai's OTOP producers conducted by Natsuda et. al. (2011) found that OTOP was helpful for community based enterprises to establish themselves and for providing opportunities for vulnerable segments of the population, such as older workers. Although Tangpianpant (2010) noted that OTOP was associated with improvements in employment, the use of local materials and knowledge, and reducing out-migration from rural areas, she argued that the program generally favoured existing successful producers and failed to target sufficiently or support the poorest in these areas. This left many OTOP producers that achieved one or two stars with debt when their products did not succeed (Tangpianpant 2010). One academic we interviewed in

Bangkok - a specialist in Thailand's development - dismissed the program as no longer important for these reasons.

Thus, the literature reveals mixed findings about the effectiveness of OTOP. On the one hand, in many case studies of one or a few tambons, OTOP seems to have helped the poor and been viewed favourably by participants. On the other, the potential benefits have been sometimes unrealized because of problems in implementation. Unfortunately, there has been little systematic analysis of varying success rates of OTOP production across provinces.

Given that the existing empirical evaluations of OTOP, which relied on either over-aggregated generalizations of the program as a whole or a few scattered case studies of individual tambons, resulted in mixed results, we should expect to observe different levels of success across provinces. This suggests that although it is clearly a central policy initiative, the OTOP program relies upon local organizing capabilities including provincial governments and civil society to implement and support (Kurokawa, Tembo, & Willem, 2010). As noted above, a successful project under the OTOP ranking system is one that makes intensive use of local capabilities, content, and traditional knowledge.

Surin province has done remarkably well in upgrading their OTOP production activities. It has had the second largest number of the highest, five star ranking products in the country. It is not only the highest in Isan, but also the highest outside of the Bangkok area. Surin has had at least double (and most years more than triple) the number of five star ranked products as neighbouring Si-saket. It also has substantially more 4-star products. The distribution of OTOP producers for the two provinces can be found in Table 4. Additionally, OTOP producers in Surin have been successful in selling their goods to consumers in Europe, the United States, and Japan.

-- Insert Table 4 about here --

One OTOP producer we visited in Khwao Sinarin district, Surin during our fieldwork produced silver jewellery. This producer relies on several dozen villagers to purchase pure silver and craft jewellery at central workshops, using traditional production methods and designs. Because the producer was able to demonstrate quality, capacity, and the utilization of local materials and contents, its products received a high OTOP rating and were eligible for local government help in marketing and making connections with buyers outside the province and overseas. This district that served as a hub for OTOP in the province. Just under one-third of all of Surin's OTOP producers and just over a third of the total OTOP sales revenues were located in this district. Silver and Thai silk producers are, in particular, well represented. There are several local outlets for marketing silver, including OTOP shops, tourism sites in Surin, as well as markets along the Cambodian border. Agents, attracted by the concentration of small-scale producers, also come in to the village directly to purchase in bulk to sell within Thailand or for export. Finally, tourists from Thailand and abroad attend exhibitions and festivals that occur periodically throughout the province in order to market their wares. The provincial government helps to organize the Thai Silk Festival in Khwao Sinarin district. The festival promotes the popular Mon-Khmer style silk and silver products in an annual festival, complete with cultural dances and a fashion show highlighting the high-quality OTOP products based upon ancient jewelry designs ("Surin province holds Silk Festival to celebrate 2,000 years of local wisdom "). A similar example is the annual Surin Elephant Roundup Festival, during which visitors travel to Surin for a variety of events centred on the community's close relationship with elephants. OTOP producers from all over the province travel to the fair to market their wares. To extend the reach beyond the local market, the locals rely on outside agents --

including commercial agents, local CDD officials and non-government agencies – to tie them to the international market.

A similar story could be told with other types of OTOP products. We visited single villages or sets of villages that were organized into small groups engaged in producing products ranging from carved wood furniture to hand-woven plastic bags, from silk to woven baskets. Because villagers engage in handicrafts in the local area, they can remain engaged in the community. This reduces brain drain, and helps diversify the local economy. Villagers can engage in these productive activities while continuing to farm, providing a diversified income. Surin has demonstrated great success in developing a large number of four and five star OTOP producers, meaning they draw upon and add to the local capabilities of villagers. Surin producers have been quite successful in upgrading production and targeting key export markets.

As with the organic rice, the OTOP explanation is satisfying only in accounting for some of the alternative sources of income for Surin's poor. There were opportunities for people in Surin to supplement their agricultural incomes with per-piece work in the off-season as small-scale entrepreneurs or craft workers. Below, we argue that the success of OTOP in Surin is linked to locally-embedded civil society and social capital, as well as the unusual commitment of local government leaders.

3) Rural-based tourism

Rural based tourism is another area in which Surin excels. Tourism, an industry responsible for five percent of global GDP and responsible for about one in every 12 jobs worldwide (UNWTO 2015), is often lauded for its potential to reduce poverty in rural areas such as Isan. Proponents argue rural-based tourism is the most labor-intensive industry outside of agriculture, and one that often provides opportunities for the participation of poorly educated low-income people. Rural tourism is increasingly

popular, and can be a way for poor rural residents to benefit from natural and cultural attractions (e.g., UNWTO 2002). Local, rural-based tourism jobs can employ farmers during the off-season, and provide employment that does not require travel or migration to the cities. For its part, Thailand has benefitted greatly from tourism. International tourism to Thailand in 2013 ranked tenth in popularity (27 million tourist arrivals, representing 23 percent growth) and seventh in tourism receipts (US\$42 billion) (UNWTO 2014). Much of this tourism is in rural areas, such as that of Isan.

Despite its potential, the actual link between rural tourism and poverty reduction depends on the manner in which the industry is structured. While many argue that tourism is a labor-intensive, cost-effective way of reducing poverty, others counter that the industry is instead a capital-intensive one (Sinclair 1991; Tisdell 1998). Whether it benefits the poor or not depends in large part on whether it is structured to include or exclude the participation of the poor (e.g., Tisdell 2001; Mowforth and Munt 2003). Some tourist spots are designed specifically to include the poor, for instance by employing poor rural residents, promoting their handicrafts and services, encouraging the development of local small businesses, or consciously purchasing agricultural products from local farmers. Others intentionally exclude the poor through, for instance, fencing them out, changing ticket prices or licensing fees, and enforcing ordinances that prevent poor people from 'harassing' tourists. Still other areas are more neutral, neither encouraging nor discouraging the poor from participating. The type of structure that each area adopts shapes the way that the poor interact with the industry, and determines whether they benefit from its development.

Surin province has been quite effective in developing attractions and events that bring in Thai and international tourists. Moreover, much is done to ensure that these visitors' consumption patterns benefit the residents of Surin and reinforce local

community. For example, as mentioned above, each November Surin is host to an internationally recognized elephant festival, featuring a traditional elephant round-up, battle reenactments, and games. Visitors are encouraged to take advantage of eco-friendly tourist activities, stay in village homestays, and purchase locally sourced OTOP and other products. Additionally, the local government and NGOs have worked together to further leverage the tourist influx associated with the round-up in order to help ethnically Suay mahouts, whose traditional skill at caring for elephants is no longer in demand. The Surin Project was developed to provide sanctuary for elephants when their owners cannot find work and training for mahouts to explore new opportunities in eco-tourism. As a result, tourist dollars are channeled into numerous homestay options rather than large capital-intensive resorts.

Other Surin festivals and events have been structured so as to benefit local communities. In addition to the Silk Festival mentioned above, the Organic Hom Mali Day and Silk Fabric Festival, the Surin International Folklore Festival, and more recently the Khong Dee Muang Surin Festival all highlight and reinforce local culture and traditions and offer local small producers the chance to market their goods. The Green Market, a weekly open market for organic farmers and OTOP producers to sell their goods is also a regular draw for tourists, whether in the area for one of the many festivals or passing through on their way to Cambodia.

Si-Saket also boasts many visitors, but these are mainly tourists headed through the province to get to the popular Angkor Wat temple in neighbouring Siem Reap, Cambodia or the Preah Vihear Temple on the border. Although there are festivals in the province, they have not captured the national and international tourist market in the same way that Surin's have. The provincial administration has promoted the *Dok*

Lamduan Ban festival to highlight the natural beauty of the region and its people and sell local goods, though the festival is much smaller in scale than those of Surin.

Thus, we would expect Si-Saket to have many tourists that pass through the province, but that they would not spend much time or money there. In Surin, by contrast, we would expect to see possibly fewer visitors, but that they would be staying longer to enjoy the tourist attractions within the province. The statistics reflect these patterns. On the surface, tourism in Si-saket seems robust – nearly as robust as Surin. In 2006, 712,515 visitors to Si-saket, according to the Thai National Statistics Office, just under Surin’s number of 784,694.² The number of visitors to Si-Saket (881,218) grew to exceed the number of visitors in Surin (809,608) by 2010. While Surin’s visitors increased to 892,860 in 2011, Si-saket’s number soared to over one million (1,066,129). Thus, superficially at least Si-Saket’s tourism seems more popular than Surin’s.

However, the two provinces differ greatly when the number of visitors is broken down between number of tourists (those who stay in the province) and excursionists (those who pass through without staying). Given the province’s reputation as a through point for Angor Wat, we would expect a higher proportion of visitors to Si-Saket were excursionists, compared to Surin with its relatively greater variety and more notable tourism sites. Indeed, more than about 70 percent of Surin’s visitors were tourists, compared to just approximately 37 percent of Si-saket’s. In 2011, when Si-Saket’s visitors topped one million, it recorded only 393,695 tourists, 59 percent lower than Surin’s 624,321 tourists. As expected, visitors and tourists to Surin also spend more each day than those who visit Si-Saket. Surin visitors in 2011 spent an average of 809 baht per day while tourists spent 860 per day, some 17-18 percent higher than Si-saket’s average of

² Surin and Si-Saket’s populations are comparable, with Si-Saket’s population about six percent higher than Surin’s.

684 per day for visitors and 735 baht per day for tourists. Consequentially, despite Si-Saket's higher visitor numbers, Surin's tourism receipts exceed that of Si-Saket by 10 percent in 2009 (818 million baht versus 746 million baht), and 34 percent in 2011 (1.58 billion baht versus 1.145 billion baht).

Thus, despite Si-Saket's greater numbers of tourists, Surin's tourism industry is more robust and more lucrative. Moreover importantly, Surin's tourism industry is better structured to benefit rural residents. Unlike Si-Saket, Surin boasts of several tourism sites in a number of rural areas. These areas are easily accessible for farmers seeking to sell products to tourists, and farmers nearby benefit from tourism through the purchase of food and other farm products. While these sites are small in scale and do not provide many opportunities for employment, formal and informal jobs can be done by local residents who can supplement their incomes from farming. Moreover, the various festivals, such as the elephant festival, are major draws and provide periodic opportunities for farmers and other rural residents to supplement their incomes. While these volumes might not be large per farmer, they are significant in proportion to their overall incomes, and provide a diversity of income sources. Moreover, rural tourism is linked to the sales of OTOP products, which, as argued above, has proved an important source of income for farmers.

Si-Saket's tourism by contrast is not only not as lucrative, it is not structured to benefit local residents as much. Most visitors do not stay long in the province, and those that do stay do not spend as much. In terms of structure of the industry, moreover, Si-Saket's industry is not especially beneficial for rural residents, although more research is needed into Si-Saket's tourism industry to say for sure.

Part II: Civil Society and Social Capital as a catalyst and intervening variable in Surin Province

Thus, the greater success that Surin's farmers had in moving into higher profit organic agriculture and related industries, combined with their greater success in implementing OTOP and rural tourism projects, helped increase the incomes of low-income farmers in Surin province. Yet, these proximate explanations, while important, raise other related questions. Farmers in Si-Saket and elsewhere in Isan also moved into organic rice production, yet they failed to achieve the successes that Surin has experienced. What factors explain Surin farmers' relative success in this? Similarly, Si-Saket, as well as other Isan provinces, aggressively implemented the OTOP program. Why was Surin province more successful than not only its neighbours in Isan, but also nearly every province in Thailand?

Despite the many similarities between Surin and Si-Saket, for a variety of historical reasons, the two provinces have followed divergent paths of institutional development at the local and provincial levels. Of these divergent features, one prominently stands out. Over the last twenty years Surin has developed a vibrant civil society that interacted dynamically with the provincial government to help micro-developmental initiatives succeed by facilitating collective action among farmers and entrepreneurs.

Although the formal political institutional structures in Thailand actively suppressed rural mobilization prior to the 1980s, traditions of community activism at the village and sub district levels persisted. Groups such as rice banks, buffalo banks, savings groups, cooperative shops, and community forests and irrigation groups - all of these involved village members pooling resources in order to protect themselves from the insecurities of weather and market. These structures spread throughout the country

in the 1980s as the central government made rural development of a higher priority. Additionally, systems of cooperative labour exchange occurred on farms in order to adjust to seasonal shortages of labour (Parnwell, 2007; Shigetomi, 1992). Animist and Buddhist beliefs about collective membership in the village community, in turn, reinforced these institutions of collective action (Shigetomi, 1992). As the land frontier diminished in the 1960s and 70s and labour markets emerged, the use of traditional forms of cooperative labour declined.

In the 1970s many of Thailand's university students travelled upcountry to conduct experiential fieldwork on the living conditions of rural Thais. A number of these students were strongly affected by these experiences and subsequently became involved in progressive movements. The 1976 massacre at Thammasat University and subsequent crackdowns by the Thanin government further drove large numbers of these communitarian-minded students to refuge with the Communist Party of Thailand in remote jungle areas. The Cambodian border near Surin and Si-saket became one of the key areas for the students (Girling, 1985; Keyes, 1995). Even after an amnesty was granted in the 1980s, many of these former student leaders, disillusioned with the idea of radical change, remained upcountry and initiated locally oriented development projects (Parnwell, 2007; Phatharathananunt, 2002). Around the same time, large numbers of refugees from Cambodia fled to Surin, where international and non-government organizations placed them into organized camps. The area became a hub for local and international NGOs providing services for the refugees. Many of these NGOs also provided services to locals and continued operating after the camps were closed down (Shigetomi, 2009).

This combination of committed, locally embedded leaders with substantial experience and a network of both local, national, and international contacts meant that a

vibrant civil society emerged in Surin province. Not only did these activists operate local initiatives to fight poverty and foster community solidarity, some were influential in the evolution of the 'community culture' neocalist movement. Thus, 'compared with other provinces, Surin had ample NGO resources' (Shinichi Shigetomi, 2009, p. 66).

Political events in the early 1990s caused this group of NGOs to become more closely networked in Surin. In 1990 the military instituted Khor Jor Kor, a forestry program designed to reorganize land use in the country's national forest reserves. The policy, which would have displaced thousands of families to make room for commercial plantations, garnered widespread opposition among people in Isan and motivated these communitarian NGOs to mobilize and coordinate their activities to protect farmers' interests. A civil disobedience campaign emerged and grew steadily until mass demonstrations led to the cancellation of the program in 1992. This campaign coincided with protests to eject General Suchinda from the Premiership in 1992 (Shigetomi, 2004, 2009). Both had a lasting impact on this network of rural community activists.

In Surin, a senior activist created the Surin Forum as a space for members of civil society - including NGO staff, farmers, teachers and even business people - to meet and exchange ideas about public issues (Shinichi Shigetomi, 2009, p. 66). Over the course of the 1990s, this group of professionals and activists gradually became a semi-formal network that often worked directly with government and international institutions for the purpose of community development in Surin. Its capacity improved gradually as it developed administrative capabilities and a professional staff. Table 5 lists agencies contracting with the Surin Forum around 2001 and the projects they implemented.

-- Insert Table 5 about here --

The Surin Forum emphasized four methods to achieve its communitarian goals: '(1) meetings for exchanging ideas and information; (2) research into the actual situation

of local society; (3) campaigns for disseminating information and political ideas; and (4) collaboration with other organizations' (Shigetomi, 2009, p. 69).

This rich constellation of committed, locally embedded leaders with substantial experience and a network of local, national, and international contacts created a vibrant civil society in Surin province. Not only did these activists operate local initiatives to fight poverty and foster community solidarity, some were influential in the evolution of the 'community culture' neolocalist movement. Shigetomi (2009, p. 66), based on his fieldwork-based research on civil society in Isan argues that for these reasons, the civil society networks in Surin were extraordinarily dense. His research on other provinces in the region – including Si-saket – found civil society to be comparatively lacking. This remarkably dense, well organized network of civil society actors led to the successful utilization of central government micro-development initiatives. Programs like OTOP and the Thai Village Fund thrived in this environment.

Organic Rice and Local Civil Society

The tremendous success experienced by Surin in growing, processing, certifying, and marketing organic agriculture depended greatly upon leadership, ideology, and engagement. The groups that had formed in the 1980s helped encourage and facilitate the shift to growing organic rice in a number of key ways. First, they provided important training and education. Small farmers began exploring the possibility of transitioning to organic agriculture in the early 1990s. Concerned about illness related to pesticides, fluctuating market prices, and indebtedness, farmers in Surin formed the Natural Agriculture Group (NAG) in 1992, with the assistance of NGOs like Surin Farmer Support (SFS). These organizations help farmers to identify and begin to disseminate a set of best practices for organic farming. Over the next 20 years a wide array of nongovernmental organizations developed to help small farmers engaged in

organic agriculture. Organizations such as SFS and the Organic Rice Fund in Surin provided farmers with training in the use of organic farming processes and organic fertilizers (Woranoot, 2009).

Second, these organizations worked to reduce imbalances that emerge when small farmers interact with larger and more powerful networks of market actors. For instance, distributional conflicts between distributors, processors, middlemen, and farmers have the potential to develop between upstream and downstream segments of the agricultural supply chain. For example conflicts between sugar cane producers and millers over the costs of resolving bottlenecks and the equitable distribution of profits presented a major challenge to that sector in the 1980s (Doner, 2009). Many rice farmers had substantial experience with a middleman system which limited the agency of farmers (Sukpanich, 2003). The NAG was established specifically to deal with the power that traders and mill owners had over the prices paid to farmers (Chamontri, 2009, p. 32). Many collective organic farmers groups in Surin helped to overcome these upstream-downstream conflicts by purchasing their own mills directly, including the Surin Rice Fund, the Prasart Cooperative, and Bua Kok organic Hom Mali rice producer.

Third, this dense network of NGOs helped connect small farmers to the international market. For instance, they have reached out to international environmental NGOs to market their organic products. They've been selling Fair Trade rice to Europe and, with the help of SFS and the US-based Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (Engage), to the United States' ('Freedom Farmers Rediscover Food Security,' 2005). These organizations also helped farmers become compliant with the standards certification bodies such as the Organic Agriculture Certification of Thailand and the Surin Province Organic Certification.

These efforts started to attract official support. Starting in 2000, Surin provincial governor Kasemsak Sanpote made it clear early on that the facilitation of Surin organic Rice was among his top priorities. He noted the important role of local civil society in fostering the development of organic agriculture, 'The work has been established on a large scale...There are quite a number of persons in Surin who are highly respected for their long advocacy of alternative and organic farming. Some have networks in foreign countries where they sell their produce. The farmers only need the knowledge and the belief.' (Sukpanich, 2003).

Kasemsak's championing of the organic agriculture cause meant that the dense network of civil society organizations received official state recognition and support. Provincial agencies help to coordinate the activities of organized civil society. His efforts also reinforced many of the NGO's initiatives, including help them extend their reach into the international market place. For instance, the governor held brand-marketing workshops to gather ideas from operators of rice mills, agriculture cooperatives, farmers groups, and related state bodies ('Thailand: Surin to hold workshop on Surin Hom Mali rice brand marketing,' 2005). PM Thaksin lauded the efforts of the scale of the provincial administration's efforts, noting, 'Surin provincial authorities taught 34,000 farmers about organic farming with a budget of over 10 million baht from Tambon administration organisations' ('Pilot project tapping into growing market,' 2001).

OTOP and Local NGOs

A similar dynamic occurred with OTOP, a program that was designed specifically to leverage local capacities and traditional knowledge while strengthening community and fighting outward migration. With such a dense network of community organizations to draw upon, provincial administrators implementing OTOP were able to organize activities and promote products that reinforced each other. For example,

Surin officials worked closely with community organizations to develop local tourism during the annual Elephant Festival in such a way as to highlight and promote local OTOP producers. They have since gone further to develop and promote eco-tourism and home-stay destinations that spread tourism to local communities in more remote areas of the province.

While in Surin province, we visited a number of OTOP establishments - small family-based groups producing local products, such as silver jewellery, furniture, decorative wood containers, and other such products. While many such enterprises fail, the statistics and the evidence from fieldwork both reveal that Surin has enjoyed an unusual level of success. It was clear that the provincial government was working to expand markets for OTOP handicraft producers, both marketing locally for tourists, as well as throughout the country and overseas. Thus, in the case of OTOP as well, it was clear that the social organization and the local political support were crucial.

Tourism and Civil Society

Tourism in Surin has been developed by the provincial government and civil society so as to help the local community. Community organizations and NGOs are active partners in not only providing the traditional content for many of the events, but also the deep connections that ensure that the gains from the tourism are felt by a large swath of society. As mentioned above, the Surin Forum and farmers collectives have worked to bring the Green Market and the Organic Hom Mali Day and Silk Fabric Festival to showcase their members' products. Likewise, the Silk Festival, the Khong Dee Muang Surin Festival, and the Surin International Folklore festival not only offer a way to sell local wares, but to celebrate and strengthen communal bonds. The role played by the Surin Forum and the Elephant Nature Foundation in working with the provincial government to help vulnerable minorities in the province get the most of the

influx of tourism is a prime example of this. One could easily imagine an alternative structure of tourism, where a capital intensive elephant theme park and resort with a centralized structure channels profits to already affluent investors.

Conclusion

What explains poverty reduction that occurs at a pace that cannot be fully explained by economic growth? By comparing two similar provinces in Thailand with similar economic growth, one that had experienced an unusual level of poverty reduction, we could focus on factors outside of this growth that can explain declines in poverty reduction. In addition, by controlling for geographic, demographic and environmental factors, we could focus on social and political factors that were essential. The hope was that Surin might have traversed a new or interesting path toward poverty reduction - and that we could trace the processes of key factors.

Two levels of factors explain this pattern. As proximate factors, Thai political leaders, NGOs and farmers concentrated on three central government policies that were implemented especially well and in such a way as to maximize poverty reduction. Farmers not only shifted into organic rice - a move that increased their incomes greatly - but managed to establish an internationally recognized brand. Further, the OTOP initiative allowed low-income farmers to produce handicrafts in their own homes, under the support of a program intended to link them to international markets. Finally, rural tourism was structured so as to benefit poor farmers, OTOP producers, and vulnerable groups. Festivals showcased local products and encouraged tourists to see and experience local traditions.

But explaining what policies created the conditions for poverty reduction is not sufficient. After all, Thailand is a unitary state - central policies apply to all the

provinces. Moreover, Surin's neighbours also implemented OTOP and at least attempted to enter into the organic rice market. To answer this puzzle and make it useful for theory and policy, we examine what factors allowed Surin to succeed in these policies to a much greater extent than its neighbours. Here, politics and social forces are both important. First, political conflicts in Bangkok pushed students to the hinterland. Many socially active and well-educated youth ended up on the Cambodian border, many in the province of Surin. Once the conflict ended, these turned into skilled and successfully organizers. They established a number of NGOs that were designed to help local farmers and resist central policies that harmed their interests. What is more, when policies such as OTOP, rural tourism, and organic rice became opportunities, these organizations were uniquely well placed to help leverage these opportunities. All three have a number of pitfalls. How do small-scale farmers deal with larger and more powerful international players? How do they overcome collective action problems? How do they establish the financial and social resources to take advantage of these opportunities? How do they develop a number of skills needed to pull off these programs systematically and successfully? These social organizations bridged these gaps.

These three factors combine to increase farm and nonfarm incomes sufficient to reduce poverty greatly. Yet these factors are significant for other reasons as well. As noted in Figure 2, first, they allowed farmers to stay at home, breaking the double-edge sword that migrating to Bangkok or other major cities has meant. It allowed development to stay local, and reduced the incentive for the most capable people to leave the area. By staying closer to home, farmers were not subject to the abuse and exploitation that sometimes occurs to non-skilled labour; locals usually enjoy the benefits of far more social capital when they stay at home - by taking advantages of

additional economic opportunities in the local economy, these farmers did not have to abandon their social ties and social capital. Second, in contrast to the prescriptions of developmental theorists - whether they prescribe pro-market, parastatal measures, or approaches like those of developmental states, Surin pursued a markedly different approach. Where all of these theories prescribe pursuit of heavy industrialization, Surin focused on agriculture and household handicrafts. Whereas these theories envision high-tech and large-scale development, Surin focused on stimulating low-tech and small-scale opportunities that poorly educated farmers could take advantage of. This ensured that the economic growth generated from these and other policies immediately and directly benefited poor farmers. No trickle down was needed.

Moreover, despite the fact that Thailand is a unitary state, local provincial leaders were also important. While Si-Saket governors changed frequently over this period, Surin enjoyed sustained leadership under Governor Kasemsak. Because Kasemsak enjoyed an especially long tenure as governor and because he was able to work with such a dense network of committed partners in civil society, he was able to implement innovative approaches to achieving national policy goals, such as promoting organic rice. The provincial leadership would likely have been insufficient without the strong local capacity and the network of farmers and NGOs would likely have faced much less success without a stable, invested partner in the provincial capital.

The pursuit of organic rice, OTOP and rural tourism helped to generate economic growth in Surin - yet other provinces in Isan grew faster based on these or other factors without reducing rural poverty nearly to the same extent. These social and political forces combined to create organization and social capital. When opportunities emerged from the pro-poor, pro-rural Thaksin government policy, Surin was uniquely positioned

to respond in a way to ensure that poor farmers could take advantage of the opportunities.

Thus, Surin provides an example of poverty reduction that allows us to transcend the bankrupt and tired 'Growth is Good' debate. Growth is part of the equation, but the more urgent question is what kind of growth most directly benefits poor farmers. Here, Surin provides an answer that is as startling as it is obvious: to reduce poverty, social and political forces are needed to shift policies in ways that generate economic opportunities of a kind that poor people can take advantage of them. While this should be self-evident, the advice generated from studying Surin stands in stark contrast with those that emerge from most development agencies, those that urge us to maximize scale of production, promote efficiency and productivity by incorporating high technology and encourage urbanization. In this way, Surin province reflects the advice E.F. Schumacher gave decades ago. The beauty of small and low-tech scale production created the conditions under which the poor could reduce the poverty that plagued them for decades. To take advantage of these opportunities, social organizations and subsequently local political support provided the structures needed for low-income residents to take advantage of these opportunities. In this way, bottom-up, rather than trickle down, growth generated a virtuous cycle that focuses economic growth on the poor. Whether the recent developments in Bangkok support or undermine these trends remains is a major concern.

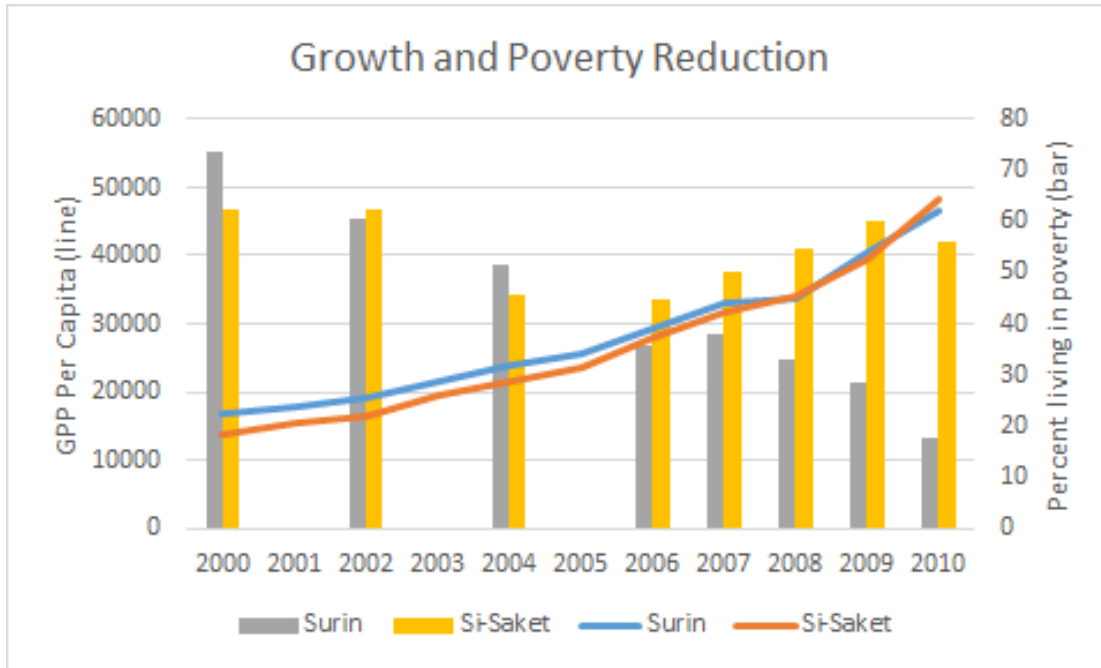


Figure 1. Growth and poverty reduction in Surin and Si-Saket. (Source NESDB 2012, 2012b)

Figure 2. A graphical statement of the causal mechanisms and argument

Province	2000	2002	2004	2006	2009
Si-Saket	36.74%	40.53%	43.58%	35.23%	41.40%
Surin	22.23%	24.03%	27.35%	10.61%	15.58%

Table 1. Percent of income from farming profits and non-money sources

Surin							
Year	Wages and Salaries	Profits (non-farming)	Profits (farming)	Current Transfers	Property Income	Other Money Receipts	Non-Money Income
1998	32.2%	8.0%	16.1%	9.5%	1.3%	2.3%	30.6%
2000	25.5%	12.4%	11.1%	13.6%	8.4%	1.3%	27.8%
2002	31.9%	12.7%	12.0%	14.3%	1.1%	2.8%	25.0%
2004	29.7%	14.5%	13.7%	12.2%	1.5%	3.9%	24.4%
2006	35.8%	18.7%	5.3%	15.3%	1.5%	2.0%	21.4%
2009	29.1%	19.7%	7.8%	13.9%	0.7%	3.1%	25.7%
Si-Saket							
Year	Wages and Salaries	Profits (non-farming)	Profits (farming)	Current Transfers	Property Income	Other Money Receipts	Non-Money Income
1998	23.0%	16.4%	16.6%	6.5%	1.2%	5.2%	31.2%
2000	23.9%	18.8%	18.4%	8.2%	1.9%	3.6%	25.3%
2002	21.0%	14.2%	20.3%	12.3%	1.0%	4.5%	26.8%
2004	29.5%	11.2%	21.8%	9.7%	0.8%	4.3%	22.6%
2006	27.0%	13.5%	17.6%	15.2%	0.8%	2.6%	23.4%
2009	19.6%	13.4%	20.7%	20.6%	0.6%	1.4%	23.7%

Table 2. Percent of income from various sources
(Source: Provincial Statistical Reports, Surin Si-Saket 2006-2012)

No.	Province	Total planting area	Grains produced (ton)	Producer/Group (people/group)
1	Surin	195,978	90,149	12,584
2	Roi-et	321,357	46,147	-
3	Srisaked	110,697	44,279	8,750
4	Buriram	102,659	23,000	200 groups
5	Ubon Ratchathani	25,160	16,064	1,261
6	Yasothon	36,886	9,952	1,676
7	Chiang Rai	5,800	3,480	658
8	Amnatcharoen	8,000	3,200	1,220
9	Phayao	1,200	600	42
	Total	807,737	230,881	200 groups, 26,191

Source: Office of Commercial Affairs, Surin

Table 3: Organic Rice Production in nine Isan provinces.
(Taken from Patrawart (2009, p.257))

Province	2003	2004	2006	2010	2012
Sisaket-1 Star	0	0	15	9	4
Sisaket-2 Star	0	0	98	72	77
Sisaket-3 Star	102	115	122	79	75
Sisaket-4 Star	35	29	53	89	75
Sisaket-5 Star	2	5	6	19	26
Surin-1 Star	0	0	5	6	10
Surin-2 Star	0	0	49	42	45
Surin-3 Star	131	119	123	62	40
Surin-4 Star	51	34	95	120	132
Surin-5 Star	0	18	13	67	80

Table 4: OTOP products by quality

Agency	Type	Project
National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB)	Government agency	The 9th national development plan National Economic and Social Advisory Commission Border area development promoting sufficient economy and civil society
Health System Reform Office	Government agency	Health system reform
Election Commission	Government agency	Election coordination
Upper House	Government agency	Human rights committee
Community Organization Development Institute (CODI)	Independent state agency	Provincial coordinator Livable City Project
SIF office (SOFO)	Independent state agency	Networking on river basin Community master plan
P-NET	NGO	Poll-watch activities
Foundation for Consumers	NGO	Networking consumers
Thailand Volunteer Service	NGO	Community radio
NGO Coordination Committee for Development	NGO	People's plan
The Foundation for Child Development	NGO	Radio broadcast campaign
Agent unknown	NGO	Educational reform

Table 5. Surin Forum Activities

(Source: Taken from Shigetomi (2009, p. 68))

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