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From the perspective of the sending countries there must be concerted efforts to address the push factors which drive people into situations where they will migrate at all costs and thereby are vulnerable to be trafficked. In such situations information campaigns without concrete alternatives for vulnerable people will only be a waste of time. In West Africa for example, poverty is one of the major push factors. Therefore any prevention project, which does not address poverty directly by economically



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empowering vulnerable groups, cannot achieve much result. Other factors include violation of human rights, natural disasters, conflicts, harmful traditional practices, social exclusion, lack of functioning governments and political persecution. If these factors are ignored people will continue to explore unsafe migration channels and ultimately find their way into the arms of traffickers.



“Call it empowerment!”



Although trafficking might be a global phenomenon, the context in which it occurs varies, and so do the responses to it and the debates evolving around the issue. Within the Mekong sub-region¹, prevention of trafficking in humans touches on topics like Burmese politics and the fact that migratory movements in the region are to a large degree determined by human rights violations and the dire situation in Burma. The rift between anti-trafficking and migrant groups in Thailand is a concomitant phenomenon and leads to a range of other controversies. Broader themes, like empowerment of women or the re-conceptualisation of government initiated strategies regarding migration and labour laws play a role, like anywhere else.

(Jackie Pollock, Liz Hilton, and Nang Lao Liang Won (Tay Tay) discussed with Oretha Gilbert and Barbara Heinzelmann from GAATW)

Jackie and Tay Tay, you are both involved with migrant worker issues in Thailand, particularly working with Burmese migrants, Liz you work with a sex workers’ organisation in Chiang Mai. The phenomenon of human trafficking is somehow related to your field of work. What comes to your mind when you hear the term ‘trafficking’?

Liz: The way the term ‘trafficking’ is used still doesn’t recognise the trafficked people as being anything but a sack of potatoes that can be moved around. And that is what I think is not good. Their dignity, their courage, their aims, and their choices in trying to get around it has to be recognised. But nothing of that at all: You are just a ‘victim of trafficking’.

Jackie: For me, it is not the word ‘trafficking’ I have a problem with. It is the word ‘anti-trafficking’. It is the way the phenomenon was taken up and the responses to it. It was taken up by some groups with the aim of stopping prostitution - not ‘sex work’, I might add! It is sex work which is the easiest to target by anti-trafficking groups because sex work is not under labour laws. So in other words you can use anti-trafficking

¹ The Mekong sub-region comprises of Burma, Cambodia, Lao, Thailand, Vietnam and Southern China.

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measures to address prostitution. For example, you can complain about domestic workers being exploited. You can go to an office and say: 'We've had word that these women working in your area are being horribly treated and in slavery like conditions. What will you do about it?' And then it is about the protection and compensation they will receive, because even domestic workers have labour rights, they have to be registered. But because sex work is completely outside of this, there is no way to address it as labour exploitation. Sex workers are stigmatized and discriminated against. Even those groups that used to work on sex workers issues and where sex workers had a voice are now saying: 'Oh, what could we do now? Oh well, let's work on trafficking!'

Tay Tay: Which has a lot to do with the fact that huge amounts of donor money worldwide are spent on anti-trafficking work at the moment. Money is pouring in for anti-trafficking projects and programmes, therefore now everyone quickly includes trafficking into the work agenda.

Jackie: We have lot's of experiences with anti-trafficking encounters here, in Northern Thailand. Women who work as sex workers are 'rescued' and removed from brothels in an attempt to combat trafficking. The aim is to 'rehabilitate' these women. After that they are sent back home, if they are migrants. They

are sent back to the same situation they left in the first place.

Liz: The sex workers from Burma don't want to be 'rehabilitated' and be put into a rescue home or shelter. If they are arrested it means two days in detention, a 2000 Baht² fine, and back across the border from which they can reenter Thailand. Staying in a government public welfare center and going through all these 're-training' measures means months without the possibility of earning money. Generally these women have to support a large family, eight to ten people - and they are the only breadwinner. Twenty-nine of the women we work with had their work place raided and were "rescued" and sent to public welfare centers. They went on a strike because they didn't want to stay and didn't want or need to participate in vocational training. This shows the extent of their anger. A year later one woman has still not been released from her "rescue". It is difficult, we can't talk to her at all.

Tay Tay: If these women would like to be 'rescued', they would tell us, right? The anti-trafficking groups who do these rescues and their so called strategies! What kind of strategies are these? How many women do they really help, in the true sense of the word? How can they think they contribute to combating trafficking by pulling a few resistant women out of brothels? The women don't want this. They crossed the border in

² Approximately US\$ 50.

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order to work, they need to survive. They also ran away from human rights abuses in Burma.

Liz: Trafficking in the Mekong sub-region will only decrease substantially if we can get rid of the military regime in Burma! This is the only way it will stop! You don't see the same number of people coming from Lao or Cambodia to Thailand.³

Jackie: There is a case in Chiang Mai of a girl being forced to work in extremely abusive conditions as a domestic worker. Her "employer" is a very influential person both in Chiang Mai and in Shan State. All the anti-trafficking groups have been contacted on this case, but nothing can be done. When it comes to 'real' situations which require a response, there is nothing anti-trafficking groups can do.

Liz: Back to the brothel raids, and another example of how ineffective the work of many anti-trafficking groups is: Next door to the brothel which was raided recently is a horrible brothel that Empower can't get into. The public health authorities can't get into, nobody can. The sex workers working in the same area say it's horrible. The women apparently are being treated like slaves. If you ask the anti-trafficking groups why they don't do anything about this place, they answer you: 'Oh no, we can't get in.' Isn't that

the indication that if you can't get in somewhere, it is therefore most probably not a very safe place? And that you then specifically should try and do something about it, maybe help these women? The women who were 'rescued' by anti-trafficking groups instead were all women who had phones and would have been able to contact someone by themselves and ask for help had they wanted to. The women were split up, some were put in shelter homes in Chiang Mai. Some of the women were sent as far away as Phitsanulok⁴. Phitsanulok is a long way away from all the support groups. Also, people there don't know Burmese women, they don't know hilltribes - they simply have no clue about these issues. Gradually, the women are sent home, back to Burma. 'Sending home' means someone has to go to their villages and first find out where they came from. Let everybody know that you have been picked up as a sex worker and that you are coming home soon, you may as well be on a bus marked 'victim' or "bad woman".

One woman was trying to find out why she had been arrested. I said to her: 'You haven't been arrested. You have been rescued.' She then asked: 'For what?' 'To help you'. She replied: 'This doesn't help me!'. I told her: 'They are going to arrest the person who brought you to here.' She asked: 'Whom? My mother?'

³ In 2002, the number of migrants from Burma in Thailand was estimated between one and one and a half million people, from Lao between 100 000 and 300 000, and from Cambodia around 88 000 people (Source: Asian Migrant Yearbook 2002-2003. Asian Migration Centre, Migrant Forum in Asia, Hong Kong).

⁴ Small town in the Central region of Thailand.

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Jackie: The anti-trafficking groups are not trying to do any interventions for the people who have been trafficked and exploited in other work sectors. Domestic workers: no! Factory workers: no! Fishery? There must be so many guys out there who are trapped on fishing trawlers in the sea but no one cares - as long as you are not having sex!

Liz: It's unfortunate, that the anti-trafficking groups have no contact with the sex workers community. They've got no feel for that, they are not involved with them. This is why they can't see the difference between a migrant sex worker and a trafficked woman, they can't see the difference between a woman and a child. They clearly lack contacts amongst the sex workers.

What do you think about prevention of trafficking initiatives? Any experiences with and views on that?

Jackie: It is all about preventing! Preventing people from leaving, preventing people from doing things. Preventing them from migrating, making them afraid.

Liz: Prevention initiatives usually spread only one message to people through their awareness raising campaigns: Do not leave your village! Don't go!

Jackie: There are some great projects in Thailand that really empower young women. But they get their donor support under the heading of prevention.

Therefore, when they do advocacy it's always about prevention. Why do they have to present it like that? It's good as it is!

Tay Tay: Sure, but this is the whole thing: actually, women aren't allowed 'to be'. You have to 'prevent' them from doing something. We are so used to perceiving women as 'victims'. That is what I see most. It shouldn't be about prevention, it should be about empowerment!

Liz: Yes, exactly. You can do the same project and call it empowerment.

Tay Tay: Some prevention projects collect data about the number of people who leave their villages. They spend endless amounts of money on capacity and research trainings for community leaders and teach them how to collect this data. Those people are then responsible for tracking down the ones who left their communities, and this information is used for project statistics or to evaluate how successful the project's prevention activities were. Some people assume that if less people leave the villages, prevention measures have been successful. Because people did not leave their homes and were prevented from the possibility of being trafficked. But do we really have to spend so much money on that? I don't agree with it. A lot of people have to leave their places, for many reasons, poverty is one of them. Why do we have to track them down? We are violating somebody's freedom and privacy.

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Liz: I agree. What are we: sniffer dogs?

Jackie: And then the SPDC's⁵ strategy to prevent trafficking: No woman under 25 years is allowed to travel on her own without a guardian. That means that women have to find a trafficker if they want to go anywhere.

Liz: A prevention strategy would be: All women should have access to travel documents, all work including, sex work, should be recognized as work with safe and fair working conditions.

Jackie: Well, the SPDC is not happy to talk about migration because that would mean having to talk about why there are so many people illegally leaving their country. And it would mean having to admit that the situation is so bad. But they feel comfortable talking about trafficking, because there is a middle person involved, someone luring people out of the country or kidnapping them against their will.

Liz: The big evil Mr. Unknown? I don't think there is a Mr. Big-Trafficker. I think it's small individual operations with cooperation from some local authorities.

How do you think destination countries play into that whole picture? What do you think could be done on their side to prevent trafficking?

Liz: At the moment it is really hard for a Thai woman to get a visa for the US or

for several other countries. But it's easy to find a trafficker. Therefore, immigration structures have to be rethought.

Jackie: In Europe, migration is an issue blown completely out of proportion. Everyday there are at least two articles in the newspaper on migration. They mix migration up with asylum, with smuggling, trafficking - they mix it all up with different things. It's both the far right and the far left which are anti-migration.

Liz: In Australia, it's completely forgotten that we are all migrants. We are all boat people.

Jackie: I think there has to be a whole global re-evaluation about what migration is. What is migration? Haven't we always moved around? Is there a way to manage it better?

What do all of you here think would be a good approach to resolving the issue of trafficking in the region?

Liz: Get rid of the military regime in Burma! And then we can see, what we've got left...

Jackie: Get more in contact with the sex workers. They work in the same brothels with women who have been trafficked, with women who don't want to be there. Contact with domestic workers is more difficult because they are more isolated.

⁵ The State Peace and Development Council, current name of Burma's military regime.

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Liz Hilton works with Empower Foundation, Chiang Mai. Empower is a Thai organisation working with sex workers. It offers education, health advice, and a community base for advocacy for the rights of sex workers. Visit: www.empowerfoundation.org

Nang Lao Liang Won is an Advisory Team Member of the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) and Presidium Board Member of the Women's League of Burma (WLB). Visit: www.shanwomen.org and www.womenofburma.org.

Liz: If I was going to work in anti-trafficking I would open a stall in the market to get in touch with the domestic workers! And contact women working in the market. Because eventually the domestic workers have to leave the houses of their employers to go shopping and buy groceries for them on the market, right? If market women can identify domestic workers who are held in slavery like conditions, really find out what they want in the way of assistance and then anti-trafficking groups can be guided by that advice.

Jackie: Yes, the community contact is an important criteria.

Liz: The other vital solution is improvement of working conditions in all industries in Thailand and the implementation of labour laws, including for migrants. At the moment, whether people are tricked to go abroad or not, they may end up at a work place with terrible work conditions here in Thailand. If these didn't exist, labour exploitation of people, and specifically migrants, could not happen.

Because safe migration does not mean anything if we also do not launch campaigns for safe workplaces in order to prevent trafficking.

Liz: That's right. Moving someone from another place and forcing the person to work under decent working conditions does not happen, because you couldn't make money out of it. Trafficking would be prevented.

Do migrant groups actually advocate for safe migration and safe workplaces as an explicit strategy to prevent trafficking?

Liz: Do we believe that safe migration and safe workplaces will prevent women being deceived, coerced and forced to work? Yes. Do we advocate for safe migration and work? Yes. We don't talk about it in narrow terms like trafficking prevention because it actually means a lot more than that. Safe migration and safe work are basic human rights under the UDHR not something special for people at risk of being trafficked. Anti-trafficking is just the latest buzzword.

Jackie: We migrant groups had a lot of clashes in the past with anti-trafficking groups in general. But maybe now it's the time to come out and get together. We were feeling that we should actually have a meeting with like minded groups to put out alternative ideas and strategies for prevention of trafficking. Otherwise we are just stuck and getting nowhere.



'A single flame can light a thousand candles'



Making people owners and stakeholders in the process of devising solutions to their problems ensures empowerment and a more successful output. This formula might explain Gabfai's success of using participatory community theatre to raise awareness of the issue of trafficking, thereby helping to prevent the incidents of trafficked victims from the communities within which it works.

(by Oretha Gilbert)



Gabfai office, Chiang Mai

Gabfai is a community theatre group based in Chiang Mai¹ province in the North of Thailand. Its current director, Amarin Plengrusmee, established the group in 1996 and today has a full time staff of six, most of who were with the group when it started. Except for the director who has a degree in Education and Audio-Visual Technology and a background in theatre, the rest of the staff are all self taught and have honed their craft mainly by doing it.

The English translation of Gabfai is 'matchstick.' The group's motto is 'A

single flame can light a thousand candles.' This statement truly captures the essence of what Gabfai does. The group works at the community level to empower and educate young and old on how to prevent trafficking. Gabfai's objectives are to equip communities with the tools to make informed decisions and choices and to empower communities so that they can disseminate information to other communities.

¹ Province in the North of Thailand

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Gabfai staff meeting

Gabfai was born out of its director's desire to work locally within Thailand to address the issue of human trafficking. He worked with a theater group in Bangkok which focused mainly on the issue of 'child prostitution' and targeted a mainly western audience (the group performed in the United Kingdom and Germany) and Thai nationals living in the west. When the Bangkok group split up he made the decision to start a group in Northern Thailand to raise awareness of human trafficking mainly because there was a need for education on the issue of trafficking. The North of Thailand was perceived as a 'sending region' for trafficked persons by the rest of the country underscoring the need for intervention.

² Northernmost province in Thailand

³ Shan people are ethnic Burmese who flee to Thailand to escape gross human rights violations and to find better economic opportunities. They are denied refugee status in Thailand and are treated as illegal migrants making them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/cgi-bin/ri/bulletin?bc=00483>

Gabfai works in communities with schools, youths, adults, district and provincial leaders and NGOs mainly in two Northern provinces. In Chiang Mai province the group works in 3 regions, Wieng Haeng, Fang and Mae-Ai and in the Mae-Sai region in Chiang Rai² province. Its main goal is the prevention of trafficking in women and children. Its target groups are 80% Shan people³, 15% hill tribe people and 5% Thai. Gabfai uses a two-prong strategy of community outreach and mobile theater to penetrate target communities.

Community Outreach

When working in rural areas the group embeds itself into the target community often living among the villagers for many months, thereby developing a relationship of trust. It then works directly with at risk groups such as students and youths conducting workshops, performances and life skill trainings, in which participants learn about issues related to trafficking, HIV/AIDS, how to protect themselves from domestic violence, worst forms of child labour, drug prevention, human rights, migrant workers rights and first aid. The workshops, performances and skills trainings serve to educate and empower villagers about the issues and

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also to teach them practical and effective strategies to prevent themselves from becoming victims of these social ills. Gabfai also works closely with the boys and young men in the villages to educate them about trafficking and other social issues.

Students and youths participate in theater performances which focus on preventing trafficking but are also allowed to address other social issues of particular concern to them. They engage in the process of participatory self-representation by creating and performing plays about their own lives and the issues that affect them. Participants learn advocacy skills through the use of media such as radio announcing and broadcasting, community loudspeaker and poster making campaigns. Some students use music to get their message out. They are also given the opportunity to perform for other communities and groups such as at shelter homes for trafficked girls.

Adults in the villages have on occasion requested Gabfai to facilitate workshops on preventing trafficking to better educate them about the issue. On such occasion, in addition to facilitating workshops the group has also adapted its plays tailoring them specifically for adults. The 'freeze method' is sometimes used as a way to encourage the participation of the adults. Often the play stops at a critical moment and the participants work out the solution or outcome of the issue or problem highlighted.

Gabfai has attempted to broaden its reach within the community by working not only with schools, youths and village leaders but also with local traditional Shan folk artists ('Likae')⁴. Social problems are introduced and addressed by utilising the traditional genre of folklore. The use of tradition becomes a powerful media not only to raise awareness of social issues but also serves as a mechanism for exposing the younger generation to their cultural traditions. Gabfai also uses traditional instruments and puppetry to enhance its performances.

The group targets urban working class communities by using a method it calls the 'TOT (Training of Trainers)-trafficking for working people', in addition to its theater performances. Its strategy is to reach urban communities through workshops and trainings on issues related to trafficking and prevention by providing conceptual clarity trainings and other practical information. The groups receiving the training then train other groups within the community thereby helping to spread the message of prevention.

According to Gabfai's director their target groups have changed over time. He explained that Thai people used to be heavily trafficked in the area but a shift seemed to have occurred whereby most of the trafficked victims are now from neighboring countries. He also noted a significant reduction in the number of target areas in which Gabfai currently

⁴ 'Likae' is a popular theater form in the North East of Thailand performing folk plays that are similar to fairy tales.



Staff taking a break

works, stating that when the group first started it worked in 14 target areas throughout the North, but today Gabfai works in only 5 areas. The group attributes this reduction to improved awareness of the issue in high-risk areas due in part to its prevention message.

Mobile Theater Project

The mobile theater project targets the general public and is primarily a tool for awareness raising. Performances are held in both rural and urban areas and the main target groups are tourists, migrant workers and the middle class. Often the Thai middle-class is ignorant about the plight of migrant workers from neighboring countries and also about the issue of human trafficking. Gabfai's director blames the popular media for

this lack of knowledge among the middle class citing that the Thai middle class know more about what goes on in the West than they do about what goes on in their own backyards.

Gabfai's strategy during its street performances is never to point the finger or lay blame on any particular group but instead it tries to educate people about trafficking and aims to provide a better understanding of the issue within its larger context such as its relationship to other issues like restrictive migration, internal conflict and insecurity, poverty and sex tourism.

Audience Response

Audience response to the performances is at times emotional and overwhelming. People are visibly affected by the performance and the hope is that this will inspire greater awareness and commitment to the issue of trafficking. At the end of each performance audience feedback is solicited by conducting a mini survey. In addition to the survey, the 'fist full of rice' method is used to assess the audience reception of the performance. The 'fistful of rice' method provides instant feedback of the performance. A large 'fistful of rice' symbolises a high level of satisfaction with the performance.

Gabfai's community theatre project has reached audiences of over 150,000 people in 45 provinces as far South as Phuket⁵ and as far North as Chiang Rai. Gabfai

⁵ Province in the South of Thailand

sees the use of theatre as a powerful and non-threatening media for educating and empowering people about issues that might be socially sensitive. The group's approach is that everyone enjoys playing and make belief and is more comfortable with expression through art. They are therefore better able to absorb the message conveyed because of the visual and emotional impact of the performance.

In bringing home the point of how powerful a media performance art is Gabfai's director said that often when NGOs are unable to penetrate certain communities that it has been successful in reaching these communities through performance art. He also highlighted the fact that in certain areas, particularly in the South of Thailand, that it is dangerous to address the issue of trafficking because of the involvement of organised crime or corrupt officials. However performance art works as a powerful tool to spread the message of the prevention of trafficking in these areas.

In reflecting on its work, the group has learned over time that the most effective way to bridge the divide between ignorance and awareness of trafficking is through the use of indirect and non-threatening interventions such as theatre. Particularly when working in difficult areas like in the South, its approach has been to focus its performances on issues like HIV/AIDS as an indirect way to raise the issue of trafficking.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Gabfai believes that success is measured over time and in the long term as students and youths make good life choices when faced with any of these social issues. The group also believes that it is better able to monitor progress since it remains in and continues to work with target communities for many years. It can therefore see firsthand the results of its interventions and have witnessed reductions in the incidents of trafficking in these communities. The group credits the direct participation of communities as a powerful prevention mechanism and strongly believes in the principle of making people owners and stakeholders in finding solutions to their problems.

Gabfai is pleased that its work has helped to prevent trafficking but is frustrated with some of the unnecessary barriers it encounters such as corruption in local government, lack of government support of its project and community leaders who deny the existence of the problem.

The group currently gets no funding from the Thai government though its work has been recognised by the cultural ministry of the national government who called upon the group to perform at a major event last year at the Bangkok National Stadium. Gabfai hopes to continue its work and wishes to expand its reach both within Thailand and also to international audiences through the use of other medias.

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Climbing hills and weaving scarves



Eco tourism as a strategy to prevent human trafficking serves many purposes: income is generated and jobs are created within the villages of hill tribe people. This constitutes an alternative to migration facilitated by agents who frequently exploit the disadvantaged indigenous people of Thailand. At the same time, eco tourism equates with 'ethical tourism' and strengthens the hill tribes' self esteem and cultural identity.

(by Barbara Heinzelmann)

Panting farangs¹ equipped with traditionally woven ethnic shoulder bags in which similarly traditional food (some grilled bamboo worms and sticky rice in a banana leaf) is kept for the journey, slowly struggle up the mountain. Dense and lush jungle covers both sides of the narrow path, out of which animal calls sound, unknown and strange to the foreigners' ears. The forest thins out revealing a spectacular view of mountain ranges, seemingly never ending carpets of green treetops, over to neighboring Burma. The air is thick with moisture and the heat

intense for the small group of exhausted hikers, with sweating but happy faces. They got what they hoped for when they signed up for a so called 'eco tour' in Northern Thailand: exposure to the beautiful nature, a little bit of physical exercise, and most importantly some impressive encounters with local indigenous groups in their villages. The so called 'hill tribes' are promoted as one of the main tourist highlights in Thailand and paying them a visit is a must when travelling to the North.

A strategy to prevent trafficking

Thai tour operators present the hill tribes as ethnic objects to be stared at by busloads of foreigners. Generally, they then pocket a decent profit while the displayed hill tribes are left with only a few Bahts. However, the tour our small group embarked upon was fundamentally different. It is a tour set up as a strategy to prevent the trafficking of Akha and Lahu² women and children.

The agency operating these tours is a non governmental organization (NGO),

¹ Light skinned Westerners as named by Thai people.

² Names of two hill tribes in Thailand.

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the Mirror Art Group (MAG)³, who are based in the hills of Chiang Rai Province. The eco tours appear to be a typical 'income generation activity' to boost village economy in order to enhance villagers' living standards. Consequently, this may prevent them from harm; such as falling prey to traffickers who exploit the poverty and hopelessness of the hill tribes' situation. Whilst achieving this aim, the eco tours are also much more than that. They transform a branch of Thailand's superficial and exploitative tourism industry into an experience of cultural exchange and deeper meaning. Simultaneously, the tours stimulate the Akha's and Lahu's self esteem and strengthen their cultural identity which, nowadays, is threatened more than ever before.

What started as one simple approach to prevent trafficking, within a wider project, turned out to be a multi-faceted complex undertaking. It provides the Akha and Lahu with a rare opportunity for self involvement to tackle their own issues. As part of a multi-pronged trafficking prevention project, MAG is one of three local implementing NGOs. The project consists of awareness raising strategies, coupled with capacity building efforts and income generation activities in the target villages. By strengthening the Akha and Lahu communities economically and socio-politically the project aims to combat the phenomenon of human



Akha mother with child

trafficking. Parisuda Sudhamongkala, 'Moo', who is the manager of the eco tours, thinks that the three faceted approach is crucial for the success of the project: "Only awareness raising is like watching TV, you see and listen to something and after the show everything is forgotten. To really make long lasting changes, people need to have hope for a better future. Our income generation activities provide them with this hope, while through capacity building efforts we can assist them in strengthening their communities in order to turn their desires and hopes into reality."

³ <http://www.mirrorartgroup.org>. For information on the eco tours: <http://www.mirrorartgroup.org/web/projects/proj-cult-experience.html>



Exhausted eco tourists

the beginning of the twentieth century they started to migrate slowly into Northern Thailand from Burma - a process that continues to this day.

There are areas in Thailand where two, three, or even more of these six tribal groups occupy the same mountain or district albeit remaining for the most part quite separate in their own villages. Although it is impossible to know the exact number of tribal people currently living in Thailand, it is estimated that the total population of the six tribes is approximately 600 000.

Source: Lewis, P. and E.: Peoples of the Golden Triangle. Six tribes in Thailand. 1984, London.

The hill tribes of Thailand:

The Thai government recognises six groups of 'hill tribes' in Thailand: Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, and Lisu. Each of these six tribes has its own language, dress, religion, and historical background. Although these people are not located in a single area and have no tribal organisation, the term 'hill tribe' is commonly used to refer to them.

The hill tribes who now occupy Northern Thailand have come from southwest and south-central China, and except for the Karen, large numbers of each group still live there. The Lahu and Akha migrated in stages from Yunnan, China, into eastern Burma and northern Laos. From about

Maintaining identity through tourism

But all was not easy from the start. It took several attempts to find a suitable income generating activity; one which could actually produce a stable income and be sustained by the villagers themselves. Fish farming and agricultural projects did not really work out because they are seasonal activities which could not provide enough, let alone a steady income. "Pig farming, for example, proved to be difficult, because the Lahu follow traditional beliefs which demand that all the piglets of a litter be killed if they are female. So suddenly all the pigs were gone," Moo chuckles. "But the idea of establishing the eco tours appealed at

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once to the villagers. They thought it was interesting, because it had to do with their culture and their way of living.” The tours were seen as a means to maintain their way of living and their identity. The Akha and Lahu also believed that after some years they would be able to run the tours by themselves.

Since all the three participating villages were already integrated into the tourist machinery to some degrees, it was only a matter of turning the wheel around and making sure that the benefits from the tours go to the villagers and not to a big tour operator from the city. The villagers had, over the years, experienced unpleasant tourist invasions into their homes and backyards. They had felt exposed like animals in a zoo. Therefore they were convinced that by organizing the tours themselves, they would become the managing subjects instead of the photographed objects.

Slowly, the process of setting up the tours was set in motion. A series of meetings with the villagers were held to discuss how the three communities envisaged the tours. Soon, exposure trips to other communities offering tourist home-stays were organised for the villagers. Workshops were held on a weekly basis to train a selected group of men to become guides and to teach them English. The workshops included lessons on ‘dangers on annoyances’ regarding the expected guests. “We knew from other villages that male tourists frequently asked for hill tribe women and girls to spend the night with. This was one of the issues we discussed with the villagers during

our ‘dos and don’ts’ sessions” Moo remarks. After some months, the eco tours commenced.

Akha:

The Akha are closely related with the Hani of Yunnan, China, the Akha-Hani complex numbers about two to three million people, but with just over 70,000 members in Thai territory. The Akha speak a language in the Lolo/Yi branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group, but have no traditional written language. There are a variety of schemes for writing Akha developed by missionaries or linguists which employ Roman, Thai or Burmese characters, but literacy in Akha is still virtually nil. The Akha are traditionally subsistence farmers, growing a variety of crops including rice and corn.

Though many Akha, especially younger people, profess Christianity, Akha Zang (The Akha Way), a total lifestyle prescribed in religious chants, still runs deep in the consciousness of older generations. The Akha Way combines animism, ancestor worship and their deep relationship with the land. The Akha Way is a way of life which extends beyond simple religious practice and infuses every aspect of their existence. The Akha Way emphasises rituals in everyday life and stresses strong family ties; every Akha male can recount his genealogy back over fifty generations to the first Akha, Sm Mi O.

The Akha are renowned for their hospitality and gorgeous attire, especially their headdresses, which are decorated with silver coins.

Source:

<http://www.mirrorartgroup.org/web/peoplesofmaeyao/akha-main.htm>

Bamboo everywhere

The tours are neatly organised around a two day trekking trip, passing through Akha villages with an overnight stay in a Lahu village at a higher altitude, exposing the visitors to a tremendous vista of green hills and patches of cultivated land with various vegetables, peanuts and wild banana crops. The huts are truly 'traditional', made completely out of bamboo, a most agreeable interruption to the cement plastered landscape everywhere else in Thailand. Pigs and chickens roam freely on the narrow dirt and grass paths in between front and backyards, quaint bamboo fences separate each plot from the others. A small stream winds its way through the hamlet, quietly bubbling along - the whole scenery transmits a peaceful and idyllic atmosphere. During the daytime, not many people can be seen. Men and women work in the fields and forests, children attend the tiny village school, only the old gather in front of the houses. A spirit house in the middle of the

villages completes the anticipated picture of a hill tribe settlement.

During the hike the guide prepares a meal over a fire and makes cooking equipment, cups and spoons out of - again - bamboo. Little white flags along the way point out spirit inhabited places. At the Lahu village, which is the final destination, the trekking groups are distributed to different homestays. Men and women sleep in separate corners of the huts according to Lahu custom. The tireless visitors can try Lahu weaving techniques or sign up for other handicraft activities.

At the beginning, "a major obstacle seemed to be the lack of English language skills of the guides", says Moo. But although their English is still far from good, visitors are generally accommodating and do not mind broken English. Most are taken with the charm of the tours and the fact that they have a 'real' local guide who grew up in the communities they are visiting.

The biggest problem however, which created headaches for everyone involved in the project, was finding a niche for the eco tours and some aspects which would distinguish these tours from the dozens of other operators in Chiang Rai Province. The uniqueness of these eco tours was found when MAG and the villagers started to take part in youth exchange programmes between Thailand, Singapore and the United States. Groups of young people are invited by MAG to live in the three communities and take part in a mixture of cultural programmes

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(e.g. how to weave an Akha scarf) and to a moderate degree in giving technical support to the community members (e.g. producing mud bricks for the hill tribe museum). The eco tours as a classic intercultural exchange experience targeting affluent teenagers proved to be a hit. The youth organisations abroad provide a more reliable customer base than individual backpackers, especially during Thailand's low tourist season.

Lahu:

The Lahu are a strong independent ethnic group whose settlements are usually remote from roads and towns, due to their strong commitment to the maintenance of the Lahu way of life.

The Lahu are a complex and diverse ethnicity. In Thailand there are no fewer than six different Lahu tribes, some of whose languages are not mutually intelligible. There are Red Lahu, pantheistic animists who follow a Dtoho, a messianic leader. There are also a significant number of Black, Yellow and Shehle Lahu in Thailand, many of whom have been Christian for nearly one hundred years. Black Lahu are the most populous overall and theirs is considered to be the standard Lahu dialect.

Although primarily subsistence farmers, growing rice and corn for



Preparing bamboo cups

their own consumption, the Lahu are also proud of their hunter - warrior heritage. They remain a strict, serious people governed by strong principles of right and wrong, every individual in the village answering to the common will of the elders. While less importance is placed on the extended family than in other hill tribe communities, the Lahu are still strongly committed to principles of unity and working together for survival. Lahus have the most gender-

equitable society amongst the hill tribes.

Source:

<http://www.mirrorartgroup.org/web/peoplesofmaeyao/lahu-main.htm>

Incomes and an alternative to migration

How do these efforts prevent trafficking? The eco tours provide almost all families in the villages with greater and steadier incomes. This means that parents now have sufficient resources to send their children to school instead of having to sell them to agents or letting them go to an unknown and possibly dangerous work place outside of the community. The possibility of going to school translates into more knowledge for the children, including a greater understanding of the wider world. This therefore prepares them better for the future should they venture out of their communities for work. As a major source of income, the tours replace former drug trafficking activities in the three villages. These activities were detrimental to the people's lives in many aspects and constituted another reason for the trafficking of children out of their homes.

The eco tours offer an alternative to migration as jobs are created for both women and men within their own villages. Most of the Akha and Lahu are misinformed about Thai society and life beyond the hills of Chiang Rai. They live

with distorted TV images and embellished accounts from middle men who approach the villagers' children and young people. It is not hard for traffickers to find uninformed villagers to turn into exploited victims. Many Akha and Lahu do not hold a Thai identity card and are therefore disqualified from legally working in Thailand. This combined with the lack of Thai language skills and their inherent shyness adds to their disadvantaged position within the competitive Thai labour market. "We don't propagate that people should never leave their homes. We are not anti migration", Moo emphasises. "But offering alternatives to migration is just one option like migration itself." However, jobs and income opportunities are not sufficient reasons for people to stay in one place and not move away. People have additional considerations such as whether or not they can perpetuate their own culture, the possibility to call a plot of land their own, their status in the society that they live in, and the way they are viewed and treated by neighboring communities. Identity issues are crucial. Like everywhere else, young people and children are the backbone of their societies and have a crucial role in preserving their heritage. The mass migration of young Akha and Lahu endangers this process and their own identity, leaving behind lonely old people in deserted villages and creating disoriented youth not being able to trace their origins. A cycle of physical and mental displacement is enforced which in turn increases the Akha's and Lahu's

vulnerability to traffickers, amongst others.

Holistic approaches

The eco tours as an income generating activity also comprise of the capacity building and awareness raising aspect of the anti-trafficking project. Through workshops, the creation of cultural and handicraft groups and various committees responsible for the implementation of the tours, an overall activism emerged in the three communities and social institutions were strengthened. Anti-trafficking and awareness raising messages are spread as well: The actual background story of the eco tours is explained to hikers before they head for their first mountain peak.

Holistic as the tours are in covering all three project dimensions, they likewise reflect the fact that one social problem goes hand in hand with others, and that trying to tackle one means having to deal with the others as well. Generating income for hill tribes in order to combat existing poverty, believed to be the major root cause for them being trafficked, is one agenda. Addressing other issues such as identity loss, weak social structures and drug addiction are also necessary. The eco tours in their design and implementation address the complex net of above mentioned issues and social ills. The tours are all-embracing, because they engage the whole community and do not only focus on the involvement of a pre-selected group of potential victims of trafficking.



Approaching a hill tribe settlement

Challenging problems confronting the hill tribes:

- Land. Land available to tribal people for agricultural purposes is decreasing at an alarming rate due to: reforestation, exhaustion of the soil, over-population, dam construction, road building and valley dwellers moving into the hills;
- Economy. Although they work hard and some receive benefits from development programmes, most tribal people face serious economic problems due to: lack of funds with which to purchase land, lack of capital with which