

The Dynamics of the Mining Industry in Asia and its Impacts on the People and the Environment: A Photo Documentary Project

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Introduction

As a photographer, I have been working on mining issues in my country, Indonesia, for the past four years. For the API Fellowship, I proposed a photo documentary project that would record what the mining practice has brought to the local people and their environment.

The project was conducted in Thailand from October 2011 to February 2012, and in the Philippines from February to May 2012. I visited several mining sites in both countries, and met with the local people and related activists or organizers. I talked with them, interviewed some of them, and took pictures.

The objective of this project is to make use of visual texts (in this case: photographic images) as a medium to document the dynamics of the mining industry. Visual text has some advantages compared to written text in that it could speak to people regardless of their mother tongue. Yet, the use of photographic images is still underdeveloped. Therefore, the significance of the project lies in the utilization of this rarely used medium. The photographic images could allow the stories and experiences of common people to be known and heard by a wider audience as the images could “travel” around the world and would be relatively easier to understand compared with written texts.

The paper describes the main lesson I learned during the Fellowship. It has two main sections. I will begin the first section with the fieldwork I did in both countries and will highlight the important case I learned about while there. It will be followed by the similarities and differences as I observed them. The second section discusses the photo documentary and the role of photographers. In this section, I will talk about my experiences in utilizing photographic images to convey messages to different people during the fellowship and the post-fellowship periods. In the conclusion I will

briefly reiterate the lessons I gathered from the Fellowship project.

Fieldwork findings

Thailand: Lesson learned from Non Samboon

Among the several mining sites I visited in Thailand, the case of Non Samboon stands out in terms of community-based initiatives. Non Samboon is a village located in Udon Thani province, north-eastern Thailand. This village, along with 23 other villages, refuses to host the mining industry.

Originally, the movement did not start with the mining issue, but with the environmental damage resulting from the development of the dam along the Mekong River. There were four leading activists who initiated the campaign and advocacy for the issues, and succeeded in building networks among the locals. However, ever since the geological surveys in the 1970s found the richest potash deposit in Southeast Asia in the area, investors began to target it for exploitation. Then the movement shifted its focus to the worst potential damage that could arise from the exploitation of potash. The networks established earlier made it easier to disseminate information on the interest in potash mining and its impact on the environment, particularly on the people in the area.

The inhabitants in the area are primarily into agriculture, but are also familiar with the service industry. Besides farming, many of them also work as temporary labor in the construction sector, either outside the town or abroad, especially in India and Kuwait. From such work, the people obtain sufficient income to keep their economy afloat. This is evident in their real estate properties, possession of vehicles, wealth, etc. In short, they do not fall under the category of “poor”. Their economic status makes their resistance against the mining practice stronger as they do not seek for more money which they can get if they sold



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

their land to investors. Besides, they also have legal certificates over their lands, which makes their position even stronger.

The movement succeeded in creating a kind of organization in each village in the area, including Non Samboon. These organizations do the advocacy work against potash mining in the villages. They often organize hearings with the local government and Mining Department to inquire about the latest developments; then they keep declaring their

rejection of the mining practice. They also hold education programs on local wisdom and values for the young generation. The curriculum includes introductions to soil, plants, climate, and agriculture, among others. To reach more people and keep them updated on the developments, the organizations also run a community radio and issue regular publications.

The financing of all these initiatives comes from among themselves (the local people). They have, thus far, managed to develop three main mechanisms to generate funds. Firstly, they organize an annual event called Bunkum Kao Yai. It is a ceremony to express gratitude for the harvest. It is usually held in a temple in each village. In this event, members of the community contribute and collect some part of their harvest to sell. The proceeds from the sale of the harvest go to the organization's account. Besides collecting the harvest, people also contribute some amount of money to add to the fund.

The second mechanism is the arrangement of collective rice paddies. The villagers hold a draw to decide whose paddy to use for the organization. The owner of the paddy lets the organization use the field and divide the harvest into equal portions. Lastly, the local people also cooperates with NGO networks to raise funds for their operations. However, the portion of the funds generated from this method is small as there are only a few NGOs in the area.

Isan is the ethnicity of the local people here. When I asked what makes them willing to support the movements, they gave three main answers. One of them said that the land is their homeland and they are Isans, who have a special gift in farming and fishing. So, for them, the land is their life and something they had inherited from their ancestors. If one goes to their house, one can easily find the symbolization of this in the buffalo head's skeleton. This skeleton is that of the dead plowing buffalo's they cared the most for. They put it on the wall of their house or barn. It symbolizes a close connection between the farmers and their fields.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Some have said that the people would not be capable of working in the mining company once it began to operate, because most of them are already in their forties or older. They do not have adequate educational backgrounds for the company's needs either, although the company has promised to give jobs to the locals. On the other hand, most of the younger generations have wandered about in the cities to work. Therefore, the demographic character of productive labor in the area has been taken into consideration.

The last one said that it is the trust they have in the initiators of the movements that has convinced them to side with the movement. Their consistency since the 1970s until the present is key here.

The local initiatives to defend their land and refuse the mining companies or investors have been running for more than 10 years now. According to the local people, government behaves as though it were neutral to the issue. But I was not able to confirm this directly, because of my limited

access to the government. However, the people themselves said that, in fact, the companies have bought some property in the area, that is projected to be the entrance door for the underground mining. They have even erected an office building in the vicinity. These developments have made the people think that government facilitated the coming of these companies to the area.

The Philippines

Unlike in Thailand, I did not meet with so many local people directly affected by mining in the Philippines. I did meet with different groups and NGOs in the country, but most of them were activists or community organizers. Indeed, the movements at the mining sites I visited were mostly driven by NGOs or the Church. For example, that in Rapu-rapu was organized by the Church, while that in Tampakan was organized by the NGO, the Church, and the B'laan people. Meanwhile, that in Palawan, which has been able to capture the public's attention, was pioneered by Gina Lopez, the activist behind the Save Palawan Movement.

The main difficulty I faced in personally meeting the affected people in the Philippines was the peace and order situation. Their location was always said to be unsafe as a result of various conflicts. Indeed, the Philippines has a high death toll arising from mining conflicts on record. I also received some rejections from the affected people because although their situation had been publicly exposed many times before, their problems remained unresolved. Therefore, they tended to dislike the idea of being exposed again.



Figure 6

There are at least three reasons that create a situation which tends to stop outsiders from entering the community. First, the terrain in the Philippines is indeed more difficult than in Thailand. The infrastructure is also less adequate. Second, the open armed conflict makes it much more complicated in the Philippines. Third, besides the Church, civil society organizations that have mushroomed have created confusion among the people to some extent.

Differences and similarities

Observing the situation of mining sites in Thailand and the Philippines, I found some similarities and differences.

The mining practices in Thailand and the Philippines are similar in terms of the following:

- Most of the mining industry has necessitated sacrificing a huge portion of productive farming fields and fisheries. One example is the case of Rapu-rapu in the Philippines. The added value of mining for the locals is not significant because they could only get low-paying jobs in the company and live like the average people in the area, whereas the added value from minerals is enormous. In fact, such situation is also evident in Indonesia.
- The locals/affected people show some resistance to mining operations in their area. The resistance usually surfaces when the operation is about to start or is already running.

The differences between the two settings outnumber the similarities, as follows:

- The Philippines is rich in mineral content, especially gold. Therefore, mining operations in the Philippines are much more extensive than in Thailand.
- In terms of the law, Thailand already has legislation on minerals, which is quite progressive: Community Health Impact Assessment (CHIA) conducted by the



Figure 7

National Health Commission is required in addition to the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). Further, to some extent, the Law is quite effective in justifying the rejection of mining operations in a particular area.

- For its part, while the Philippines does not have a law on minerals, it has legislation recognizing indigenous peoples, which is said to be quite progressive even among ASEAN countries. It also has the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. However, in practice, the internal frictions in the Commission are so sharp that it could not perform its function as effectively as expected.
- Mining conflicts in the Philippines are much more visible and often end up in violence. Perhaps, this is because of the loose rules on arms possession, making them easy to access. Moreover, the issue of rebellions in the Philippines has justified the military's entering conflict areas, which have mining potentials. In Thailand, on the other hand, the military is not present at the mining sites. In this sense, the situation of the Philippines is quite similar to that of Indonesia.
- As for the character of the locals, I learned that in some places in Thailand, the bond between the people and their land is very strong. This makes the locals come up with solid and continuing community initiatives like that in Non Samboon. In the

Philippines, the bond is relatively more loose. Although I still doubt the following account, it seems that ‘modern’ religions (in this case: the Church) also influence the shift in the relation between the people and their environment (including land, properties, inheritance, etc.), from the traditional to the “modern”. I also found this phenomenon in Indonesia, for example, in Molo, East Nusa Tenggara where the Protestant Church dominates, and in Porong, East Java where Islam values dominate. In many cases, the old traditional local values have managed to maintain the strong bonds between the people and their homeland. For instance, traditional beliefs often guide the people to practice regular rituals and ceremonies to honor the spirits of nature (the cave, land, mountain, stones, trees, forest, corps, etc). Such practice is often disallowed in the ‘modern’ religions as it is considered idol-worship when the honoring practice is, in fact, an attempt to preserve nature and the connection between people and nature. The people are afraid that if they do not do the rituals to honor nature, then nature will be angered and will give them bad luck.



Figure 8

- Disputes on land ownership complicate mining conflicts in the Philippines. Unlike in Thailand, most locals in the Philippines do not have legal proof of land ownership. On the other hand, most mining operations take place in the customary land for which the locals do not have certificates. In contrast, in Thailand, meanwhile, people usually

have certificates for their land so that their bargaining position is relatively stronger in terms of land ownership or property rights.

As mentioned previously, there are more differences than similarities between the conditions in Thailand and the Philippines. These indicate that localities exist and we cannot just generalize the situation in Asia. However, if I look at the situation in my country, it seems that the situation in the Philippines is quite similar to that in Indonesia: land conflicts result from unclear property rights; the poor economy gives rise to weak bargaining positions; and so many interest groups partake in an issue and sometimes fight with each other, thereby confusing the common people.

Photo documentary and the role of photographers

The mining industry is an extractive industry that damages the environment and drastically changes the contour of the land. Its most noticeable impact is in the form of physical change. A photo documentary can document the changes well. If done properly from time to time, it could have recorded the presence of Mountain X that has since disappeared, for instance.

Besides serving documentation requirements, visuals could be the medium for conveying or exchanging messages effectively, notwithstanding language barriers. I had an experience in a site in Thailand that had problems with gold mining. I happened to bring some pictures of mining sites in Molo, East Nusa Tenggara and East Kalimantan (coal mining) with me. The locals asked me if mining was practiced in Indonesia and whether the people in Indonesia had similar problems. I showed the pictures to them and told them the stories of people in Molo and East Kalimantan, including the conflicts they experienced. They were surprised and realized that they were not alone in their problems. They told me that if one day they could meet the people in Molo or East Kalimantan, it would be interesting if they could talk and share the problems they were facing. But what happens is that it is I who travel here and

there to deliver the message, like a courier would, to the affected people using visual images.

Similar things occurred when I was back in my country after the Fellowship. I stayed for quite some time in Molo. I met with the locals, showed them pictures, and told them stories of the people in Thailand and the Philippines, including the initiatives they had undertaken. Although it was not really concrete, I could sense the solidarity they felt towards people here and there, with whose experiences they were familiar.

I had another experience when I took pictures of oil and gas accidents in Porong, after the Fellowship. I stayed in a village that is soon to be relocated because it is going to be soaked in the mudflow. After I spent some time taking pictures of the local people, I started to show them pictures of the village and engaged them in some discussions. Thereafter, they started to appreciate knowing about what had happened to the people in other villages: that because of the forced migration due to the mudflow, other people also lost their jobs and had no other choice but to do whatever they could to earn money and make a living. From this, they gained some insights and reflected on what could happen to them in the future.

All this time, I have always thought that, as a photographer, I have become a witness to what has been happening in my surroundings. However, whenever I meet with a community, especially those in remote areas, I am no longer a witness but a messenger. I convey the message that, perhaps, the people in remote areas could not receive because they do not have the privilege to travel and see another world like I do. I am still not sure where all these will lead me to.

Perhaps, this workshop is a good venue for discussing this phenomenon with the other Fellows. But I believe that making the victims understand and become aware of each other is much more important than bringing their stories to the cities, where the people would forget it at the blink of an eye.



Figure 9



Figure 10

I am not intending to say that this is the best idea but, at the moment, I find this the most effective way for me to communicate with the people affected by mining. Until today, I am still in touch with some contacts in Thailand and the Philippines, and they can appreciate what has happened in Indonesia through the images I produce.

Conclusion

I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the API Fellowship. From my experience in Thailand and the Philippines, I have learned a lot: that the key to the success of the movements lies in the consistency of their words with their actions, as well as in their independency, both in the financial sense and their essence. It is an important lesson for me in viewing the mining areas in Indonesia.

There are not many photographers who focus on documenting the social impacts of this extractive industry. I believe that, in the coming years, the trend of investments in the industry will escalate and will entail even more complicated and greater social impacts.

What I learned from Non Samboon about the School of Homeland Lover, for instance, is very inspiring. Upon the completion of the Fellowship, I talked about this with the indigenous elders in Molo and with some environmental activists in my country.

They are interested to do the same to their offspring because they also feel that the formal schools do not effectively teach the young generation about respect and manners vis-à-vis their own customs. An environmental NGO in my country even visited Non Samboon to get some exposure and learn the lessons that I had. I believe that the knowledge they have gained will be useful in places with mining concerns in my country, where I can spend a relatively longer period disseminating information among the affected people thereat. Of course, this undertaking should be treated with careful consideration of their own living values.