

WORKING DRAFT

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**THE DISINTERMEDIATION OF THE STATE: NGO's AND
THE INTERNET IN EMERGING DEMOCRACIES**

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The Disintermediation of the State: NGO's and the Internet in Emerging Democracies

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Abstract

The Internet's ability to change the terms of the dialogue on development issues is examined through case studies of three controversial development projects in Thailand. The three cases – the Yadana gas pipeline, the Samut Prakarn wastewater project, and the Pak Mun dam – demonstrate varying levels of involvement by local (Southern) and international (Northern) NGOs. Overall, the Web has greatly facilitated the involvement of the latter, but has been little used by the former. The paper explores implications for the Internet's impact on democracy that are suggested by the three cases and concludes that, where local democratic systems are emerging as they are in Thailand, Web-facilitated involvement by Northern NGOs may weaken rather than strengthen the development of a pluralistic democracy. Involvement of Northern NGOs has tended to shift the venue and terms of the discussion in ways that make the process potentially less responsive to local concerns and less subject to a resolution serving the needs of all local parties. In cases where democracy has not reached the emergent stage, as in Burma, international NGO involvement may play a more positive role, but remains subject to problems associated with reliability and equal access.

Democracy, the Internet, and Transnational NGO Activity: An Overview of the Issues

The Internet has demonstrated its ability to transform the way non-government organizations (NGOs) operate in the United States, how they work with each other, how they communicate with their members, and how they interact with other stakeholder groups. In

developing countries, this transformation is just beginning, but it shows every sign of having much more far-reaching impacts on NGOs' operations, performance, and impact.

In consolidated democracies such as the United States, the Internet is layered on top of well-established norms and institutions whereby NGOs interact with governments, corporations, members, and other audiences. By contrast, in countries such as Thailand, democratic norms are still very much in their formative stage, as are NGOs. The Internet dramatically changes the relative power of the state and non-state actors. It will shape how NGOs deal with the state, and vice versa. It will influence how each of them – NGOs and the state – relates to an international audience that, through the Internet, now has a direct window into these interactions.

The Internet has tremendous power to strengthen NGOs, enabling them to communicate more effectively and much more cheaply than through pre-existing means. As such, it strengthens democracy, because pluralistic democracy cannot flourish without a multiplicity of distinct and independent channels to develop and express views. In an economy where many levels of society lack effective access to the mass media, the Internet gives real meaning to such key democratic principles as freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

When the state and democratic systems are still in their formative stages, however, the Internet can undermine democracy as well. A core principle of democracy – enshrined along with freedom of the press and expression in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution – is the right to petition the government for redress of grievances. This principle suggests that the proper avenue through which an individual, group, or community wronged by the government should seek fair treatment is by petitioning that same government.

In the United States and other strongly established democracies, Internet campaigns on public issues reinforce the petitioning process, calling on citizens or other stakeholders to bring

pressure on federal agencies, contact congressional representatives, support a court case, and so forth. Even where the call is for pressure on a company or other private actor, both sides are nearly always American, part of the U.S. political process and ultimately under its jurisdiction.

In developing country disputes, however, the Internet tends to promote extra-governmental channels for seeking redress. In the examples below, international NGOs, acting or claiming to act on behalf of local NGOs and local interests, mount campaigns that are aimed at actors outside the national governments concerned. They may call for pressure to be brought to bear on international donors, on other governments, on multinational corporations, or on the investor community. In some cases, they also call for non-Thai activists to exert direct pressure on the Thai government. This redress process differs fundamentally from the democratic model, as will be further discussed below.

On the positive side, Internet use in Thailand clearly increases the ability of local NGOs to work with and contact international colleagues. The mechanisms for this collaboration, and the resulting shifts in relative power and influence between and among local and international NGOs, are clearly still developing. As shown by the cases examined here, however, the impacts hold both positive and negative implications for the North-South NGO relationship.

Three Case Studies from Thailand: The Tangled Web

Three cases of Internet-facilitated protest demonstrate how this new medium is changing the character of local development issues and altering the channels through which local populations seek redress of grievance. The cases studied here involve a range of issues, but each represents an essentially local dispute that has attracted international attention:

- The ***Samut Prakarn*** case concerns an industrial wastewater treatment plant that is being constructed in an industrial province within the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority. Begun in 1987, the Samut Prakarn Wastewater Management Project, costing about US\$750 million and partly financed by an Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan (US\$230 million), will serve a highly concentrated industrial area with high levels of pollution. Controversy has surrounded the decision to locate the plant in a coastal area (Klong Dan) south of Samut Prakarn, on the basis of allegedly corrupt land procurement and concerns regarding project impact on nearby fisheries and coastal habitats.
- The ***Pak Mun Dam*** is a hydroelectric and water control facility built on the Mun River in Thailand, with support from the World Bank. Over the past ten years, this project has generated continuing local protests from villagers dependent on fisheries in the Mun River. Other issues of local concern include inadequate compensation for villagers displaced due to dam construction, ecological impacts including reduced fish migration, and lower-than-expected power generation and irrigation benefits.
- The ***Yadana Gas Pipeline*** project is without question the most intensively disputed project of the three that are explored in this paper. Linking Burma's (Myanmar's) offshore gasfield with Thailand's market for natural gas-fired power development, this multinationally-funded project has attracted ongoing protests and disputes for several years. International investors TotalFinaElf and Unocal have faced numerous protests, as have the Energy Generating Authority of Thailand and others involved in the project, which began development in the mid-1990s. Issues raised include allegations of forced labor in Burma, environmental

impacts related to the pipeline and other infrastructure, negative impacts on villages along the pipeline route in Thailand, and the fundamental acceptability of investing in collaboration with a dictatorial regime such as the Burmese government.

These three projects differ greatly in the extent to which Northern and Southern NGOs have been involved and worked together. In each case, though, international involvement has ramped up dramatically over the past 1-2 years, and has seen greater leadership exerted from the Northern side. The following table identifies several of the leading NGO players on each side, North and South:¹

<i>Project</i>	<i>Northern NGOs</i>	<i>Southern NGOs</i>
Samut Prakarn	Bank Information Center DDH Greenpeace	<i>None identified</i>
Pak Mun Dam	Bretton Woods Project Earth Hope Globenet International Rivers Network Probe International World Commission on Dams	Assembly of the Poor (Thailand) Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples (Hong Kong) Southeast Asia Rivers Network (Thailand) World Rainforest Movement (Uruguay)
Yadana Gas	Burmanet Free Burma Orchestra Burma <i>(many others; see links)</i>	Population and Community Development Association (Thailand)

The Burma case is fundamentally different from the other two, because the issue centers around the nondemocratic nature of the Southern government, rather than primarily around the project. Given that it is highly unlikely that international NGO pressure would have an impact on the Burmese government, no matter how skillfully the cause were pursued, NGO activists have seized on the Yadana pipeline, with its links to multinational investors TotalFinaElf and Unocal and to more democratic Thailand. For this reason, the Yadana pipeline has attracted far

more attention than other gas pipelines. Although a number of environmental and labor concerns are alleged in the case of Yadana, the primary allegation is that the project is inherently complicitous with a nondemocratic regime actively involved in human rights abuse.

In this case, indigenous (Burmese) activists are clearly unable to address labor or environmental concerns through local protest, and there is no alternative but to seek redress through international channels. International activism has focused on issues of Burmese democracy and has generally not sought to link to local NGOs in the Yadana area (which are predictably weak, nor to Thai NGOs addressing issues along the Thai parts of the pipeline.

An unresolved problem with reliance on the Web to disseminate information in non-democratic cases, however, is the absence of corroboration. Activists do not accept arguments or data put forward by the parties to Yadana – either the oil companies or the Burmese government – and independent verification is scanty at best. On the Web, activist charges can be posted, in effect, anonymously and then picked up and echoed in dozens of websites, much more easily than could take place with older, more expensive media. This problem is inherent in the Web, but is clearly worse in cases where few independent sources of information exist.

Samut Prakarn and Pak Mun present a very different picture. An examination of the extensive Web materials on these two cases highlights key points of similarity between the two, but also shows intriguing differences.

Protest began locally in both cases, and was subsequently picked up by a Northern NGO specializing in a related issue. The Bank Information Center (BIC), a leader in anti-development bank programming, took the lead in Samut Prakarn and the International Rivers Network (IRN), a leading activist on dam-related issues, has led the charge on Pak Mun).

The Northern NGO then mounted an active international campaign aimed primarily at international organizations and/or at bringing pressure from Northern activists to bear on local authorities. These second-tier Northern NGOs were heavily dependent on information provided by the initiating Northern NGO, with few showing any evidence of direct involvement on scene.

The “globalization” of the conflict dates only from the past one-two years, even though the Pak Mun protest has been ongoing in Thailand for nearly a decade. Through the Web, the Northern activists were able to accelerate the protest process and cut through distance, picking up local news articles and turning them into global calls for action.

Both projects focus on environmental issues, of high priority for Northern NGOs, but also raise issues of equity, corruption, and poverty alleviation. Without the link to the ADB – and therefore to BIC’s anti-multilateral bank focus – Samut Prakarn would not seem to be a good target for international activism. It is an industrial wastewater project (not a “green” project), the corruption alleged relates to petty local land speculation, and the ways in which it will affect local peoples remain uncertain. Pak Mun, by contrast, focuses on one of the environmental “hot buttons” – hydroelectric dams – linking it to an established stream of global activism.

Another key point of difference is the involvement and leadership by local NGOs. In the Samut Prakarn case, leadership has come primarily from the Northern NGO community. The issue has received considerable local press attention, but local NGO involvement is not evident from the record. Dialogue with key stakeholders such as the ADB has been stage-managed by BIC, the Northern NGO. Information has been presented in the name of local interests but in ways that clearly reflect Northern NGO dominance of the communication (see for example, the letter to the ADB, self-evidently not prepared by the local village leaders who are the alleged signers: <http://www.bicusa.org/asia/samutprakarn/final%20letter%20E11.pdf>).

In Pak Mun, by contrast, the local NGO (Assembly of the Poor) is much more organizationally sophisticated. It has proven adept at keeping this issue on the political “front burner” in Thailand, through regular protests in Bangkok and elsewhere and skillful linkage of the project to broader issues of rural poverty.

The local NGO has virtually no such skill in using the Web, however. It is thus dependent on IRN for international linkages and involvement. The two groups differ greatly in their priorities (Assembly of the Poor targets rural poverty and equity issues, while IRN targets environmental issues). Given this difference, it is not clear that the Northern NGO has a legitimate claim to represent the Southern NGO, or that it would make the same choices in resolving the conflict. Many potential solutions that might satisfy the Assembly of the Poor’s constituency – an effective income-replacement system, for example – would not meet the core demand of IRN, which is that the dam be opened. In this situation, it is not clear that the Web-reinforced involvement of the Northern NGO either assists in resolving the problem or even promotes solutions that would serve local interests.

The two cases also differ in the extent to which they have moved the action out of Thailand and into international fora, where Thai NGOs and Thai political processes are much less able to be effective. BIC has elevated Samut Prakarn to an issue with the ADB, where non-English-speaking villagers and local small-scale industrialists have few effective channels of communication. In this forum, the richness of competing local voices (such as those alleging that *both* competing sites for the wastewater treatment plant were tainted by corruption) becomes lost. Local political mechanisms to resolve the conflict are short-circuited. The IRN campaign, by contrast, calls on global activists to pressure Thai decision-makers (providing draft letters to the Prime Minister, email links, etc.), as well as the World Bank and the donor community.

Despite this difference, in neither case have Northern NGOs acted in ways likely to strengthen democracy in Thailand. On the contrary, the Northern NGO involvement, greatly facilitated by the Web, has created alternative channels for the redress of grievances wherein local voices, local leaders, and local institutions are weaker, rather than stronger. The Web-facilitated process has substituted an isolated, offshore, highly rhetorical Web-based process for the richness of a truly democratic dialogue, one where competing local claims and counterclaims are subjected to local verification, and where compromise among competing interests can be reached through open and dynamic political processes.

As the case studies above demonstrate, development professionals must now ask whether the Web-facilitated involvement of Northern NGOs truly serves the interests of the Southern NGOs and the people they represent. When is the Northern NGO truly providing a neutral channel for the Southern NGO to increase its outreach, and when is it exploiting the relationship to gain a legitimacy that it does not in fact possess? When is the Northern NGO helping underrepresented local groups to make their voices heard by the powerful, and when is it directing their protest into a channel that serves the Northern NGO, but ultimately undermines the effectiveness of the Southern NGO in its own society?

The Web has arguably promoted democracy in the Yadana case, bringing international pressure into a situation where local voices and local democratic processes are stifled, but its impact in the two Thai cases is far more ambiguous. It has brought international attention to issues of potential concern, but it has done so in ways that trace “end runs” around local political processes, that alter the issues at the center of the debate, that suppress competing facts and viewpoints, that obscure the identity of the parties to the protest, and that, overall, reduce the

scope for the Thai political process to balance competing local interests through a healthy pluralistic process. This is no way to build democracy.

Responsibility Standards for NGOs: The Biter Bit

Campaign NGOs and the stakeholders with whom they work – companies, donors, and foundations – have a responsibility to recognize the Internet’s potential to lead to unanticipated negative consequences and even to abuse of the North-South NGO relationship. We are only at the beginning of this evolution, and it is therefore far too early to say how the Internet’s impact will play out. Nonetheless, now is the time to begin to understand and deal with these problems.

NGOs and their donor partners should consider adopting the same measures that they recommend so heartily for corporations and donors: codes of conduct, impact monitoring, and transparency in decision-making. A detailed development of code language is beyond the scope of this article, but certain elements can be identified from the case experience outlined above. A code for Northern NGO collaboration with Southern NGOs should extend at a minimum to clarifying: a) when and to what extent the Northern NGO speaks for its Southern colleagues, b) how relative power in the relationship is best managed, c) how direct Web access by Southern NGOs can be strengthened, and d) how to give explicit consideration to whether use of the Northern NGO for redress of grievances represents the best development choice for the Southern NGO and for its developing world constituents.

ⁱ Websites for organizations sited and notes on Web usage:

Northern NGOs:

Bank Information Center (US): maintains extensive website, including page on Samut Prakarn:

<http://www.bicusa.org/asia/samutprakarn/final%20letter%20E11.pdf>

http://www.bicusa.org/asia/samutprakarn/ppa_thai.htm

Bretton Woods Project (UK): formed by network of NGOs, site includes Pak Mun information

<http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/www.brettonwoodsproject.org/update/17/17a.html#18>

Burmanet (USA): maintains website with daily updates on Burma and a compilation of news articles

<http://www.Burmanet.org>

DDH (Netherlands): activist information site, primarily threaded discussions, includes discussion on Samut Prakarn

<http://www.ddh.nl/duurzaam/duurzaamlijst/archief1/msg00301.html>

EarthHope (US?): massive website with links to everything from school milk safety to Pak Mun; excellent, if somewhat chaotic, example of campaign automation, including letters and fundraising, as well as information

<http://earthhopenetwork.net/index.htm>

http://earthhopenetwork.net/alerts_6-00_1.htm#thai

FreeBurma.org (US?): a website maintained as a portal to other websites, with extensive links to chat rooms, etc.

<http://www.freeburma.org>

Globenet (France): extensive activist website, with chatrooms as well as links, information

http://www.globenet.org/reseau-solidarite/actions/action216_e.htm

Greenpeace (US): maintains extensive website, including information on Samut Prakarn.

<http://english.sohu.com/20001114/file/0887,248,100019.html>

International Rivers Network (US): one of the leading NGOs in this area, with extensive information on Pak Mun; often sited by other NGOs as source of information; has Thai affiliate, Southeast Asia Rivers Network (no website)

<http://irn.org/programs/pakmun/000720.action.html>

Orchestra Burma (US?): maintains website on Burma issues

<http://www.orchestraburma.org/environment/thai-malaysia-gaspipeline.htm#1>

Probe International (Canada): maintains extensive website, including section on Mekong River Campaign

<http://www.probeinternational.org/pi/Mekong/index.cfm?DSP=subcontent&AreaID=72>

World Commission on Dams (US): maintains extensive website, including case study of Pak Mun

http://www.dams.org/studies/th/th_finaldraft_execsumm.htm

http://www.dams.org/studies/th/th_finalscope_contents.htm

Southern NGOs:

Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples (Hong Kong): Site provides good examples of automatic communications methods being used to expand impact

<http://www.acpp.org/appeals/2000/00072012.htm>

Assembly of the Poor (Thailand): does not have own website, but information provided on International Rivers Network site; has email access
<http://www.irm.org/revival/decom/orgs/AotP.html>

Population and Community Development Association (PDA, Thailand): leading NGO, active in development along Yadana pipeline route in Thailand, has website, but does not provide information on Yadana or activist links
<http://www.pda.or.th/>

World Rainforest Movement (Uruguay)
<http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/35/Thailand.html>