

Young People as Agents of Change: The Mekong School's Approach to Strengthening Young People's Potential for Sustainable Development in the Mekong Subregion

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Abstract

The Mekong School was established in 2015 by the Institute of Traditional Knowledge, Chiang Khong Conservation Movement (or Rak Chiang Khong) as a community-based learning center to provide knowledge about Chiang Khong district and the Mekong River to local people, particularly young people. This article analyzes the approaches and challenges of the Mekong School in its support of young people in contributing to sustainable development in Chiang Khong district and the Mekong River area. The qualitative method was used to obtain data through interviews with the key participants from the Mekong School, a public school, as well as other young people. The research results show that the Mekong School currently has three approaches: 1) experience-based learning; 2) a joint curriculum with a public school; and 3) the Mekong youth forum, as a long-term plan. However, the Mekong School has faced many challenges, including time limitations, the Thai centralized education policy, the way in which young people conceptualize sustainable development, and young people's capacities.

Keywords: Mekong School, Rak Chiang Khong, Greater Mekong Subregion, agent of change, young generation, social movement, sustainable development

Introduction

Since the introduction of the UN Sustainable Development Goals¹ in 2015, young people² have been identified as a key agent of change by the United Nations (UN), and contributors to the world's long-term sustainability (United Nations, 2018). UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres identified their vital importance by saying, "If we are to create a more peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous world for all to fulfil the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we need young people to lead" (Guterres as cited in The United Nations, 2018). To this end, trainings, workshops, and forums have been organized by various organizations over the world. This article focuses on the Mekong School (or *Honghian Maenam Khong* – in Northern Thai) by demonstrating how the 'agent of change' concept has been incorporated into the school's strategies for supporting the role of young people in contributing to sustainable development in Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai province and the Mekong River.

The Mekong School was set up by the Institute of Traditional Knowledge Chiang Khong Conservation Movement (or *Rak Chiang Khong* – in Thai), located in Chiang Khong district of Chiang Rai province. This movement represents local views and concerns about infrastructural development, such as hydropower dams on the Mekong River (Lin and Grundy-War, 2013). Since then, Rak Chiang Khong has been well known for its movement against the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project, which was funded by the Chinese government, and the hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries. As a result, Rak Chiang Khong has been included in discussions on development policies by local governmental

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched in 2015 as part of the 15-year global development agenda supported by the United Nations. There are 17 goals within the SDGs which are listed as the following: 1) No poverty; 2) Zero hunger; 3) Good health and well-being; 4) Quality education; 5) Gender equality; 6) Clean water and sanitation; 7) Affordable and clean energy; 8) Decent work and economic growth; 9) Industry innovation and infrastructure; 10) Reduced inequality; 11) Sustainable cities and communities; 12) Responsible consumption and production; 13) Climate action; 14) Life below water; 15) Life on land; 16) Peace, justice and strong institutions; 17) Partnerships for the goals (United Nations, n.d.).

² Young people are the age cohort between 15 and 24 years old, according to United Nations (2000). In this article, young people as key participants are between 15 and 18 years old.

organizations, and has built a collaborative network with government authorities, other communities-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as with academics and the mass media.

For Rak Chiang Khong, the Mekong School is seen as a platform for the sustainable development of the Mekong River area. This has raised further questions about how Rak Chiang Khong conceptualizes sustainable development in the approaches of the Mekong School, how the approaches work in reality, and challenges facing the Mekong School. The first section of this article outlines the research methodology applied, background information of Rak Chiang Khong and the Mekong School, their strategies for supporting local engagement in the Mekong River development, and the research results.

Methodology

The research leading to this article used qualitative methodology to obtain data on the Mekong School and its approaches. The article begins with a review of research on the Mekong School and Rak Chiang Khong, developments in the Mekong River from the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) that affect Chiang Khong district, and sustainable development as the article's underlying concept. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with key participants were conducted using purposive sampling methods to select participants from the Mekong School. These key participants included two representatives from the Mekong School, two teachers from a public school in Chiang Khong district, and 19 young people aged between 15 and 18, who participated in the activities arranged by the Mekong School. The interview information from the key participants was used to analyze the sustainable development concept. Moreover, the research applied a participatory drawing³ during the focus group with young people by asking their

³ According to Literat (2013; 87-88), participatory drawing is a visual research method being applied with children and youth. This method is advantageous to "generate metaphorical representations of the identities and concepts, and thus stimulate abstract and creative thought" (p.12). Moreover, this method can "reveal more subtle messages and more obscure realities than text-based research methods."

opinions on how the district should be developed in a sustainable way. The drawings from the young people are crucial in triangulating the concept of sustainable development from the Mekong School and teachers from the public school. Following research ethics and children's rights, a consent form with information about the research and interview questions was sent to parents before interviews were conducted. Pseudonyms are used in this article to cover the key participants' names.

Background: Rak Chiang Khong and the Mekong School

Chiang Khong is a border town along the Mekong River, opposite Houay Xai district, Bokeo province, in Laos. For this reason, Chiang Khong has often been described as a border town that has relied historically on the natural resources of the Mekong River and a culture shared with the Lao people. Moreover, this district became strategically important for the Thai government to support transportation networks (e.g., the R3A route and the Fourth Friendship Bridge) to connect Thailand with Laos and China under the North-South Economic Corridor (Uttama, 2014; Pachankoo and Shen, 2019). These networks resulted from the economic integration of the Mekong subregion countries (Thailand, Yunnan province, and Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region in China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Cambodia) named the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). The transportation networks from the economic corridor can reduce the time and cost of transportation from one country to another, and facilitate cross-border trade and investment at the same time. This could boost economic growth in the six countries, which is eventually beneficial for people in terms of poverty reduction and human development (e.g., educational level and health care accessibility) (Ishida, 2008; Shrestha and Chongvilaivan, eds., 2013).

In reality, however many policies and development projects are centrally initiated by the governments in each country of the Mekong subregion. The construction of more than ten hydropower dams along the Mekong River in China and Laos is a key example of such developments. The river is a vital source of food, with 1,148 fish species

listed by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) feeding 60 million people in the subregion (Mekong River Commission, 1995). However, the hydropower dams have become a barrier to fish migration and spawning, threatening the food security of many people who rely on the Mekong's natural resources (Matthews and Geheb, eds., 2015; Campbell and Barrow, 2020). These people are mostly powerless to voice their concerns about ecological degradation (Manorom, Baird and Shoemaker, 2017; Keobountham, 2019; Dao, 2019).

The negative impacts of such state-led development were a catalyst for the formation of Rak Chiang Khong, which was founded by Niwat Roykeaw, known as *Kru Tee* (Teacher Tee), and other local people. Rak Chiang Khong initially focused on local environmental issues in Chiang Khong district, encouraging local people to engage in environmental protection. Later, its work went beyond the district to transnational environmental and ecological issues in the Mekong River from state-led development by calling for justice for local people and emphasizing their rights and legitimacy in the policy discussions on the Mekong River development (Yong, 2020).

Interview information from Rak Chiang Khong's founder states that two strategies are being employed to mobilize the movement and empower local people: 'fighting' and 'forming.' The fighting strategy encourages people to call for justice in ways that are official (signing a petition to the government authorities) and unofficial (demonstrating against the hydropower dams with local people). The group also campaigns publicly against the negative impacts of state-led developments. In 2020, for example, Rak Chiang Khong as a member of the Thai Mekong People's Network from Eight Provinces issued a formal letter to the government authorities in Thailand, as a main buyer of the power generated from the dam, to suspend the power purchase from the Luang Prabang dam in Laos (My Mekong, 2020).

The 'forming strategy' arises from the fact that the power of knowledge is as important as the power of people. Without knowledge, the fighting strategy alone is not convincing. As a result, the 'forming strategy' emerged to enhance local people's knowledge about the

natural resources and social capital they have in their community and the potential negative impacts to their livelihood from state-led developments. The villager-based research (or *Thai Baan research*) is a substantial outcome of the forming strategy. In general, this research is undertaken by local people using research tools (such as participant observation and interviews) to collect important data from their own community to generate knowledge about a specific issue. Research findings are able to link the livelihoods and ecological systems of local people with the local terminology of water usage based on their socio-cultural heritage, and knowledge about fisheries, watering seasons, rituals, and folklore to utilize the river environment sustainably (Vaddhanaphuti, n.d.; Heis and Vaddhanaphuti, 2020).

In terms of Thai Baan research in Chiang Khong district, Rak Chiang Khong has been playing an important role in supervising local people to undertake the research and have a mutual understanding of current problems affecting their livelihood. According to an interview with a member of Rak Chiang Khong, the expected outcome of the research is that people in Chiang Khong district will be able to initiate solutions by using their knowledge and the research findings to negotiate power with the governments and corporations to convince them that local people have knowledge to support their movement. "If our movement did not have knowledge, no one would listen to us," said a member of Rak Chiang Khong (Participant no.1, 2020).

Consequently, as a platform for the forming strategy, Rak Chiang Khong established the Mekong School in 2015 as a community-based learning center for local people, including young people, with the philosophy, "Respect for nature and faith in humanity justice" (Srinakon, 2016) Mekong School is unlike the typical Thai school. There are no teachers – only facilitators and narrators, and there is no rigid educational curriculum in the school. Most didactic methods are based on field trips outside the school. School visitors can gain local knowledge from the Mekong River landscape and local people. (Participant no.1, 2020; Participant no. 2, 2020). The research results below illustrate Rak Chiang Khong's conceptualization of sustainable development in the Mekong

School, the school's approaches to strengthening young people's potential, and challenges faced by the school.

Research Results

A Conceptualization of the Sustainable Development in the Mekong School

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in the report, "Our Common Future," also known as the Brundtland Report, in 1987. This concept takes economic, environmental, scientific, ethical, and political aspects into account to promote "the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). However, it could be argued that this concept is abstract and self-contradictory with no concrete criteria to indicate sustainability (Johnson et al., 2007). Nevertheless, in 2015, the concept of sustainable development became significant through Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a 15-year global development agenda, supported by the United Nations. The 17 goals have been categorized as a triple bottom line framework: economic development, environmental protection, and social inclusion (Sachs, 2012; 2015) that have come to fore in policy discussions in many countries (see Punya and Rehbein, 2020), including the Mekong subregion.

However, sustainable development in the Mekong subregion is controversial and elusive. The concept first appeared in the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin (or the Mekong Agreement) to describe the usage of the river in sustainable and equitable ways with a strong commitment from the governments of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In the agreement, sustainable development is interpreted as equitable and reasonable utilization and environmental and ecological protection. The MRC (Mekong River Commission) plays an important role as an institutional framework to support a procedure called "The Procedure

of Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA)" to assess social and environmental impacts of proposed transboundary development projects from the governments of four countries. As a consequence, development along the Mekong River has focused on hydropower dams after the PNPCA that has led to a transboundary water conflict between the governments and civil society (such as, INGOs, NGOs and CBOs) (Sneddon and Fox, 2006; Ho, 2014).

In fact, however, many observers, activists, and local people in the Mekong subregion who work in civil society organizations criticize the PNPCA as nothing more than a rubber stamp. They argue that the Mekong agreement is unable to protect the environment and the river's ecology. Sustainability from the agreement is unsustainable for them as it has marginalized local people in the policy decision-making process. (Ho, 2014; Transborders News, 2015). For Rak Chiang Khong, genuine sustainability is not only development based on environmental and ecological protections, but it also includes local people of every generation to engage in the policy decision-making process of river development (Participant no. 1, 2020; Participant no. 2, 2020).

Moreover, Rak Chiang Khong's concept of 'sustainability' is closely aligned with the 'agent of change' concept. The latter is not new, identifying as it does an individual or a group of people, formal or informal, invited or uninvited, to play a vital role to "undertake the task of initiating and managing change in an organization" (Lunenbergh, 2010: 1; Poeck, Læssøe and Block, 2017). There is no doubt that the agent of change also plays a crucial role in mobilizing the Sustainable Development Goals to be more effective in UN member states. Ideally, he or she could play a role in tackling social, economic and environmental problems (Andriamihaja, et al., 2021), while localizing and implementing the 17 SDGs goals in the community. However, this article argues further that the roles of the agent of change could be diverse, that is to say, based on social, economic and environmental problems emerging in each community.

In the Mekong school, this concept is especially applicable to young people in Chiang Khong district in supporting both the fighting

and forming strategies already mentioned. The members of Rak Chiang Khong whom I interviewed believe that young people have the potential to use their creativity and innovative skills to apply new technology in campaigning to reveal the impacts of the Mekong River development on local people's livelihood. They are also able to raise awareness of the river's ecological and environmental issues, in both online and offline platforms. However, working with young people is challenging, as many of those in Chiang Khong district lack a sense of belonging in their community, and as well as a lack of knowledge of socio-cultural heritages and Mekong River development. One member of Rak Chiang Khong observed that the external culture of social media has slowly had the effect of disconnecting young people from their community (Participant no. 2). The Mekong School promotes a sense of belonging, shapes the knowledge of young people in Chiang Khong, and raises their awareness of environmental and ecological issues. Its efforts will be described in the section that follows.

Young People as Agents of Change: Approaches for Strengthening Youth's Potential in the Mekong School

Youth as a change agent is an underlying concept implemented in the mission of the Mekong School to young people. The interview information shows that the Mekong School has recently enshrined its own sustainability in three approaches to the school's activities and methods: experience-based learning, a joint curriculum with the public school in Chiang Khong district, and the Mekong youth's forum.

1. Experience-based learning

As a consequence of Rak Chiang Khong's 'forming strategy,' an approach called experience-based learning and based on field trips, is being used to bring young people out of the classroom to survey the Mekong River's landscape. The main objectives of the field trips are to experience the environmental and ecological changes caused by infrastructure developments on the river and, by visiting villagers, to have a better understanding of how local people struggle for their survival because of this sort of development. The Mekong School acts

as a facilitator, designing field trip activities for young people and providing them with research tools to gain and explore local knowledge.

This approach can be seen from many activities of the Mekong School. In 2017, for example, the Mekong School held the Mekong Nature Camp, funded by the Thai Fund Foundation, Open Development Cambodia, and Emerald Hub. In this camp, the facilitators and volunteers from the Mekong School addressed changes related to the Mekong River's biodiversity by visiting the river landscape and testing the potential of hydrogen ion (pH) levels in the river. Students created a handmade local map by listening to local narratives and folklore from villagers at Haad Bai village about the culture and the richness of ecological systems in the river. Young people who attended the camp could learn how to undertake research from the activities mentioned above (Thai Fund Foundation, 2017; Participant no. 2). Figure 1 below illustrates the hand-made map, "Special and Spectacular Chiang Khong," from the camp. This map shows the vital sources and geography of Chiang Khong district that comprise the source of life for people in the district.



Figure 1 Special and spectacular Chiang Khong

Source: Author

2. A joint curriculum between the Mekong School and the public school

The Mekong School has built a collaborative network with government authorities, other CBOs, and NGOs. This sub-topic focuses on the collaboration between public schools in the district and the Mekong School to formally create activities during the school timetable. The Mekong School is responsible for arranging field trips and providing knowledge about development issues in the Mekong River and detailed insight into socio-cultural and ecological heritage in the district.

Only one public school in the district has signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Mekong School to create a joint curriculum for students in grades 9 and 12. According to interview information from one teacher at the public school, the joint curricula are a result of a local curriculum supported by the Thai Ministry of Education. Elementary and high schools in Thailand are able to create their own curriculum based on local knowledge and culture (Ministry of Education, n.d., online). Currently, *Khon Chiang Khong* (People of Chiang Khong) is the joint curriculum with the Mekong School and the Special Economic Zone.

The Khon Chiang Khong curriculum, drafted by Kru Tee, members of Rak Chiang Khong and teachers from the public school, became a substantial curriculum in 2017. According to interview information from the teachers, their understanding of sustainable development in their curriculum is coherent with that of the Mekong School. This coherence can be seen from the objectives, learning processes, and expected outcomes of the curriculum. The main objectives are to disseminate the following: 1) aspects of local history and cultural diversity; 2) information about the impact on the river landscape and local people by recent infrastructure developments; and 3) folklore concerning Tamila, the indigenous ethnic group which lived in Chiang Khong district before Burmese colonialization, as well as information about the sacred Naga spirit and the guardian of the river. Without the experience-based learning from the Mekong School, the teachers from the public school acknowledge that their didactic method

in the public school alone is not adequate to provide a thorough understanding of Mekong River development.

For the learning process, the Mekong School has applied the method from *Thai Baan* research to the students in order to improve their analytical and investigative skills. For example, the students learned how to make a timeline and family tree, interview local people, and conduct surveys in the field trip. The so-called 'practical process' is also emphasized, based on learning how to deal with unexpected problems arising from development. With one credit and 40 hours per semester, the curriculum consists of three units: 1) People of Chiang Khong district; 2) Ecology and landscape in Chiang Khong district; and 3) Eco-cultural landscape of Chiang Khong district. Finally, this curriculum not only provides young people with in-depth knowledge of their community and the Mekong River, but it also supports a sense of belonging in young people and engagement in their community's development.

3. Mekong youth's forum as a long-term plan

The earlier topics illustrate the Mekong School's current strategies and collaborations aimed at strengthening young people's potential to become agents of change in the future. The next and ultimate step for the Mekong School is to create a forum in for youth the Mekong subregion. The Mekong youth forum will be developed from the Mekong people's forum launched in 2020 by a group of local conservationists and activists from eight provinces,⁴ including the Rak Chiang Khong group. The Mekong people's forum aims to be a representative of people in the Mekong subregion to monitor development carried out by governments and corporations (Kruakai Prasason, Thai 8 Changwat Lum Namkhong, 2020; Chiang Rai Times, 2020). However, it could be argued that the Mekong people's forum is abstract and has not been legitimized by institutional and legal frameworks (Participant no. 1, 2020).

⁴ The eight provinces in Thailand are Chiang Rai, Loei, Nong Khai, Bueng Kan, Mukdahan, Amnat Charoen, Nakhon Phanom and Ubon Ratchathani.

According to interview information from RCK members, the long-term strategy for the Mekong youth forum is to build a youth network in the sub-region. This forum could support both the fighting and forming strategies as a platform for young people to implement their knowledge acquired from the Mekong School to take action in mitigating socio-economic and environmental issues from the state-led development along the Mekong River. The youth forum's first step was due to start with the youth camp. The Mekong School and its collaborative network will call for young people, particularly those in higher education, from throughout Thailand to participate in a leadership skills camp as a pilot project. The Mekong School will apply the experience-based approach and research tools from the Thai Baan research that were used in the Mekong Nature camp mentioned earlier. Next, the plan is to expand the youth network to the other countries in the subregion through social media (Participant no. 1, 2020).

Although the Mekong School's approaches seem practical in shaping young people as the agent of change, there are several challenges. The following section analyzes the challenges facing the Mekong School by using interview information obtained from the key participants. These participants are the representatives of the Mekong School, the teachers of the public school, and the young people who participated in the activities from the Mekong School.

When Expectations Meet Reality: Challenges for the Mekong School

According to the interview information, it is possible to identify seven key challenges for the Mekong School. The first challenge is a time limitation. Activities from the joint curriculum between the Mekong School and the public school (the field trip with a facilitator from the Mekong School) usually take two or three hours. Opinions from the teachers in the public school show that the school's timetable is not compatible with the field trip to the Mekong School. The Thai educational policy requires students to study eight subjects per day, with each subject taking one hour, and the teacher is allowed to organize only one study trip for students each week. A teacher has no option but to switch a class

period with another teacher to provide enough time for the study trip. Furthermore, it is difficult for many students to take part in a study trip on weekends since they spend this time being tutored in preparation for university entrance exams (Participant no. 3, 2020; Participant no. 4, 2020).

The second challenge is that many students would rather put their effort into their basic education (subjects such as mathematics, science, English, and Thai language) than the local curriculum. This could be an institutional constraint for the public school to fully support time and budget for the joint curriculum since the Thai educational policy for public schools is centralized under the Ministry of Education. The ministry plays a role in formulating and implementing the educational policy for all public schools in Thailand. With this policy, students need to study the Basic Education Core Curriculum in order to pass the Ordinary National Educational Test (ONET) to attend a higher education institution. The joint curriculum is less important for the students as it cannot be used by students as a way of passing the ONET. Moreover, many students prefer to spend their time and effort taking extra tutorial classes. Despite this challenge, the teacher from the public school believes the most important thing is for students to become more concerned about the environment and empathic to the world in their daily life (Participant no. 4, 2020).

The third challenge relates to young people's conceptualization of sustainable development. It could be observed that sustainability, in their opinions, is to strike a compromise between economic development and environmental protection. Referring to the interviews with 19 young people who participated in the activities of the Mekong School, in their conceptualization, a sustainable Chiang Khong should be modernized, prosperous, and environmental-friendly. To be more precise, I applied the participatory drawing from young people in the school to analyze their subtle message and to triangulate with the conceptualization of the sustainable development from the Mekong School and their teachers acquired from the interview. The drawing shows a prosperous-looking infrastructure to support economic development and urbanization in the

district (e.g., an airport, transportation route, mall, hospital, and condominium), while maintaining green areas in the district (see figure 2). Unlike the Rak Chiang Khong members' expectations, fewer young people mentioned their community's cultural and ecological heritage during the interviews.



Figure 2 Participants' conceptualization of sustainable development in Chiang Khong district
Source: Author

The fourth challenge is the limitation of young's people capacity. Even though many of the young people interviewed acknowledge that they can be an agent of change, they are able to use their potential and capacity to contribute an uncomplicated advocacy for sustainable development in the Mekong River. For instance, most young people I interviewed put their effort into reducing plastic usage in their everyday life, sorting trash in their schools and homes, campaigning on the Mekong River's ecological problems through a short film, and taking part in the nature camp. Any other initiatives, like making more short films and nature camps, are likely to be limited by financial constraints. Therefore, the Mekong School has also played a

role as a grant seeker from its network for local young people to gain financial support for them.

Another challenge could be concluded by the students' opinions of the Mekong School. They agree that the school is too small for a class of around 30-40 students, as it can contain 10-20 people at maximum. Some students could barely hear and understand what the facilitator from the Mekong School said during the field visit to the school. Though there were many positive comments from students regarding the curriculum and the learning methods, some respondents called for expansion of the Mekong School area to allow for more people. and commented that the school buildings should be more attractive. Moreover, they felt that the curriculum itself somehow is somewhat out of date and the school should build more collaborative networks with students from other schools as well as those from neighboring countries in the Mekong subregion.

The sixth challenge relates to the financial and political constraints of the Mekong School and the Mekong Youth's Forum. The financial support from grant providers remains indispensable for Rak Chiang Khong to support both 'forming' and 'fighting' strategies in practice. Recently, many CBOs and NGOs in Thailand, along with members of Rak Chiang Khong have been working harder to compete with each other for grants to avoid financial risk and to provide funds to young people to make a campaign. Also, they continually collaborate with their network inside and outside the district for its survival. Furthermore, the Mekong Youth's Forum remains abstract. Indeed, it is challenging for Rak Chiang Khong to build a youth network with young people in other Mekong sub-region countries, due to the countries' differing political regimes. Under the current authoritarian regimes in some countries in the subregion, many young people are under government control and are almost voiceless in criticizing the state-led development in the river. This could be another challenge for Rak Chiang Khong to strengthen young people's potential and expand their network in authoritarian countries.

Finally, students, after completing high school, usually move away from their community to study in higher education. Their sense of belonging to their community decreases as a result, and thus many students are unable to continue their campaign in their community and schools. For this reason, many campaigns last for only a single generation. As one of the former students mentioned, even though many students want to promote their campaign using social media, they are unable to do so at university. They would rather strive for a higher GPA in their undergraduate degree and build their career path, which results in their becoming more detached from their community (Participant no. 5, 2021). This lack of continuity becomes a challenge for the Mekong School in its attempts to shape a long-term 'agent of change' movement in the local community. Nevertheless, one member of Rak Chiang Khong believes this a not serious problem since "[t]he big step always needs more time" (Participant no. 1, 2020).

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the Greater Mekong Subregion, economic development based on the area's geographical potential has caused negative impacts on the river and local people. For this reason, Rak Chiang Khong, a transboundary civil society group, was created to voice people's concerns over river development and raise awareness of environmental and ecological protection issues. The group's 'fighting strategy' is to employ official and unofficial platforms to call for justice for local people by exposing negative impacts from development. Its 'forming strategy' is also important in helping local people acquire the knowledge necessary to negotiate with states and corporations. The Mekong School was set up as a community-based learning center to better educate local people, especially the younger generation. In this way, they can be agents of change to contribute to sustainable development along the Mekong River. Currently, there are three approaches to strengthening youth's potential in the Mekong School. These approaches are experience-based field trips, a joint curriculum with a public school, and the Mekong youth forum as a long-term plan.

The expected outcome from the Mekong School is to support a sense of belonging, shape the knowledge of young people to employ their capacity and potential to engage in river development, and enable them to have a deep understanding of their socio-cultural heritage. They can employ such knowledge for organizing campaigns in the future. However, some challenges remain. These challenges consist of time limitations, Thailand's centralized education policy, young people's current conceptualization of sustainable development, and the lack of continuity in the campaigns from young people.

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