

CHAPTER 1

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ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE INTERMEDIATE SIZE CITIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE EXPERIENCE FROM THAILAND

Abstract This first chapter sets the tone of, and the parameters for, the field project in Chiang Mai and for the content and emphasis of the book chapters. It begins with a discussion of Chiang Mai as an intermediate size city within the urban system of Thailand, which was formally planned in the 1980s to provide the country with a network of growth poles in an attempt to decentralize the fast growing Bangkok metropolitan region. It uses this designation, and the inadequate support it received from the central government over the last twenty years, to explain why Chiang Mai, the designated regional growth center of the Northern region, has been falling further behind in its efforts to provide quality services to its population. It continues with a brief treatment of the issue of sustainability as it is adopted by the project and is used in the book, and then discusses the potential role of intermediate size cities in the sustainable development of their regions. It then uses the framework provided by these discussions to present and explain the structure and organization of the book and its sections, to introduce the chapters, and to explain the approaches taken by their authors in fulfilling the requirements of the book project.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Chiang Mai

In the urban system of Thailand, Chiang Mai occupies a prominent role. Even though by population size it does not get close to Bangkok, at 5.6 million people in 1993 the primate capital and metropolitan region of the country¹, it has been an important urban center since the end of the thirteenth century, when it was the revered capital city of the ancient kingdom of the Lanna (Romanos, Chapter 7, p.3, this volume). Until the end of the 19th century, it was the capital of the independent state of Chengmai, linked in a loose association with the central government of Thailand based on the payment of a tribute to the king every three years. Since its integration into the modern state of Thailand, it has been playing an important role as the economic and social center of the North of the country, as an agricultural market, an industrial center, and a major tourist destination.

The explosive growth of the Bangkok metropolitan region in the 1960s and 1970s induced the central government at the time to attempt a decentralization of

population and economic growth, in an effort to relieve the growth pressures on Bangkok. The result was the Regional Cities Development Programme, launched in the early 1980s with the assistance of the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (Boonyabancha and Chalitanon, 1996, 88). Following a model similar to the one promoted by the UNDP in other countries of the region, notably Indonesia in the 1960s, the plan proposed the development of nine regional cities (later increased to 24 cities with the addition of another 13 smaller regional centers) during the 5th and 6th National Economic and Social Development Plans, 1981-1991. (For more on the Five-Year Plans see Romanos et. al., Chapter 8, this volume). The principal idea behind this regional scheme was that development centers would be supported in each region, and they would in turn function as growth poles from which economic development would originate and spread into the surrounding areas (National Economic and Social Development Board, 1994). At least one dominant center would be supported in each economic region, and the centers would be linked among themselves and with Bangkok with tangible economic connections. The support from the central government would be in the form of: (a) infrastructure and facilities, (b) location of manufacturing industries, (c) improved land management to facilitate and accommodate physical growth, and (d) improvement of local government managerial capacity (National Economic and Social Development Board, 1985). Chiang Mai was designated as the capital of the North Region (Table 1).

Table 1: Thailand's Regional Cities Development Programme

<i>Designated Region</i>	<i>Regional Centers</i>
North Region	Chiang Mai, Pitsanulok
Northeast Region	Udon Thani, Khon Khan, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani
East Region	Chonburi
South Region	Songkhla, Phuket

Source: National Economic and Social Development Board, 1985.

As a result of this plan, during the last twenty years the cities identified above have received priority funding to build up their basic infrastructure and facilities, especially water supply, electricity, telephone service, and roads. Other support, in more modest amounts, came for drainage, housing development, slum improvement, and environmental protection. In Chiang Mai, a major government investment has been the establishment and development of the Lampung Industrial Estate (for more on this topic see Stafford, Chapter 4, this volume). Added to the impressive growth of the tourism sector, thanks mostly to private initiative, the economy of the city has had a strong foundation on which to grow. But in the last fifteen years the rate of growth of the population and the local economy have been faster than the rate of growth of public sector investments in the region, and thus the pressures of Chiang Mai's economic boom have been felt in the loss of quality of services (The World Gazetteer, 2002; UNESCAP, 1998; also, see Romanos et. al., Chapter 8, this

volume). When this study was undertaken in the summer of 1998, the efforts of the central government of Thailand to support the development of the infrastructure and services in Chiang Mai so that it would become a regional growth center, had backfired. The growth of the city had overrun the speed with which the government was providing public investments for its improvement, and thus the boom growth experienced by the urban region had brought in the adverse effects of shortage of services, overcrowded and congested housing and transportation conditions, environmental degradation, and a declining quality of life. Its growth path was taking the city away from a sustainable development model of evolution. And, its designation as an intermediate size city and regional center programmed to ameliorate some of the woes of Bangkok did not appear to be effective. In fact, while all the regional centers designated by the Regional Programme appear to grow, they did not succeed in slowing down considerably the continuing growth of the Bangkok conurbations (The World Gazetteer, 2002).

1.2. Sustainable Development for Chiang Mai

Our objective in this chapter, and in the rest of the book, is not to explore in depth notions and definitions of sustainability and sustainable development; others have done so, and by now the literature on definitions and philosophical treatises of sustainability and sustainable development is more than extensive (Moffatt et. al., 2001; Moffatt, 1996; Van den Bergh and van der Straaten, 1994; Costanza and Patten, 1995; Clayton and Radcliffe, 1992). Rather, our purpose here is to present the practical aspects of planning and managing a city in a developing region of a developing nation in the context of sustainability, and assess their potential to help that city develop in a sustainable mode in the future. To accomplish this aim, we have adopted a practical and down-to-earth working definition of what in our view constitutes sustainable development, and we have asked the contributing authors to interpret this definition in their own way and according to their own disciplines. As such, there is variation in the interpretations of the principles and demands of sustainable development, ranging from acceptance to conditional encounters to criticisms. This is fine with us. What the chapters of the book want to contribute is their view of how each of the economic sectors studied, the components of the urban system we surveyed, and the foundations of the social structure we analyzed can participate in a coordinated effort to move the metropolitan region of Chiang Mai towards a sustainable development path. This then determined the need for an applied and broadly defined notion of sustainable development. In our view, sustainable development is a development approach that contains four interconnected components: (a) the need to ensure the future survival of the system in its basic form and structure, that is by ensuring economic conditions supporting the system's population while preserving the social and cultural foundations of the system; (b) the desire to bring improvements into the system so as to better the human condition, that is ensure that the entire community, not just individual units of it are better-off in the future; (c) the expectation of social justice governing the system, so that rights of citizenship, opportunities for participation, and protection

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