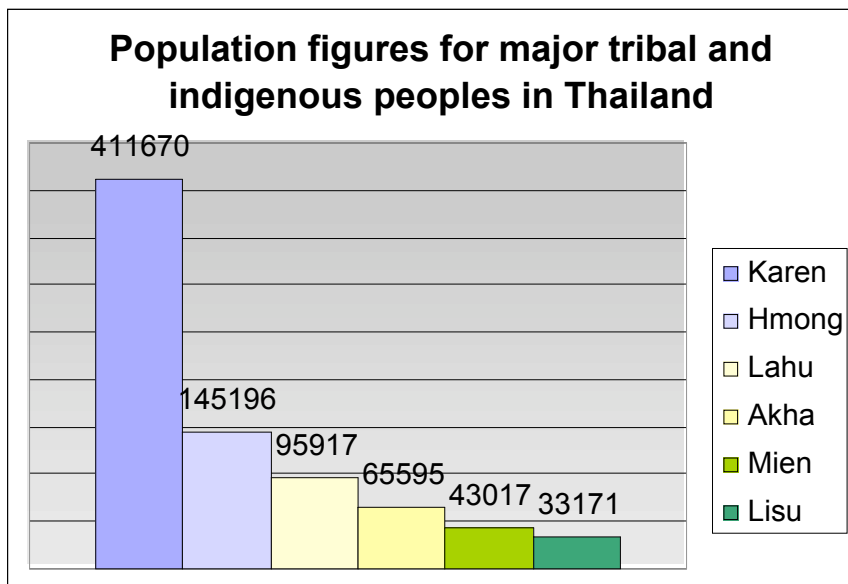


The issues facing indigenous and tribal peoples' agriculture in Thailand

1. Background information on indigenous and tribal peoples in Thailand

In Thailand, as other countries throughout the world, there exists diversity of cultural groups and cultural peoples. Our countries differ in the level of cultural diversity dependent on historical circumstances, geographical position and size. In Thailand there are nine highland indigenous and tribal groups or *chao khao* (Central Registration Office regulation on issuing civil registration cards to highland peoples, 2000). These peoples are the Karen, Hmong, Mien, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, H'tin and Khmu and are settled mainly in the northern and western regions of the country, covering 20 provinces (of a total 75).



2. Traditional way of life and traditional agriculture of indigenous and tribal peoples in Thailand

In the past indigenous and tribal peoples in Thailand practiced burnt swidden rotational farming, with each cultural group practicing different forms of this farming pattern. The general practice was of using a plot of land for a period of time, after which it was left in fallow to regain soil fertility and then cultivated once more – a pattern of farming referred to as 'rotational swiddens' (the length of the fallow differs between cultural groups and is dependent on fertility of the soil). In addition to swidden farming, some cultural groups also

practiced permanent agriculture, in particular Karen and Lua communities with permanent paddy fields.

In the past, (prior to 1960) agricultural production in indigenous and tribal communities was intended primarily for self-consumption and the agricultural system used was integrated (or mixed) cultivation. The major crop was swidden rice, and other crops were planted in the swiddens, collected from the swiddens post-harvest, and around the swidden fields. Crops planted and harvested in this manner include corn, bananas, chilli, cucumbers, watermelon, leafy vegetables, coriander, lemon grass, sesame seeds, tubers, pineapple and various nuts.

Since the beginning of ‘highland development’ (after 1960) and the arrival of academics, support staff and non-government organizations, there was a strong push for highland communities to begin cultivating cash crops to replace previous cultivation of opium – despite the fact that some of these cultural groups never grew opium as a cash crop.

From what has been said already, it is clear that the initial agricultural system based on self-consumption or self-sufficiency began to change to an economically focused production system, causing increasing community reliance on factors outside of the community. The agricultural system introduced from the outside was not a system that was well known to highland communities, the cultivation of a single crop for sale meant that communities became reliant on consumer goods from outside of the community – even those goods that they were able to produce themselves under the traditional agricultural system. In addition to this, the various different types of seeds and breeds that had been chosen and developed over centuries of selection and breeding began to disappear from communities as crops from outside replaced them. The majority of these introduced crops are selected breeds with little disease or pest resistance, are cultivated as mono-crops and rely on a heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers.

3. Major issues that are obstacles towards agricultural sustainability among highland peoples in Thailand

1. Lack of documentation for land tenure

- Almost the entire area of indigenous and tribal lands in Thailand are in areas declared as one of a variety of protected statuses, whether National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary, reserved forest, ‘pink’ military areas, or other. These legal statuses are often repetitive or overlapping in any given area.
- Due to the fact that these communities do not thus have any documented status or right to the lands they cultivate, they are entirely under the control of government officials (forestry officials), and all development or provision of basic public works is restricted or forbidden. In the present, however, local government officials usually ‘turn a blind eye’ and allow communities to remain.

- Indigenous and tribal communities therefore lack any security in their lands, and little long term development of sustainable agriculture (investment in lands) is risked. Communities cultivate crops on a yearly cash-cropping basis as they dare not risk (in many cases) the continued practice of traditional rotational swiddening as this carries the risk of losing the land to the government.

2. Lack of official legal status, civil registration and citizenship

- Currently there remain significant numbers of indigenous and tribal peoples in Thailand who have not received formal legal status, whether citizenship or other status, numbering 377,450 individuals in a total indigenous and tribal population of 873,713 (two fifths of the population)
- Individuals without citizenship or other formal legal status face numerous obstacles in everyday life, they are not able to access government services in health, education, voting and other political rights (this is especially important in local areas where councils are elected by communities), borrowing money (including the village fund initiative of the present government) and the right to unrestricted travel.
- In regards to land rights, and therefore the right to sustained agriculture, people without citizenship do not have the legal right to remain in their areas of settlement, whether they have been there for generations or not.

3. The Master Plan for the highlands, and other discriminatory policies

- The Master Plan for Community Development, Environment and Control of Narcotic Substances in Highland Areas has been implemented for two phases already, the first phase from 2535 – 2539 and the second phase from 2540 – 2544. The current phase is the third, beginning in 2002 through 2006.
- The process of drafting the current phase of the Master Plan (and both prior ones) involved no participation at all from indigenous and tribal communities in highland areas – despite the fact that they are the target group of the Plan.
- The current phase of the Master Plan emphasizes the relocation, control and ‘management’ of highland communities instead of any concept of cooperative development. The Master Plan stresses use of the Cabinet Resolution of the 30th of June 1998 which details a process of rights verification which is completely inappropriate for the reality of highland ways of life and histories. The Master Plan also divides all highland communities into 4 groups, according to which the future of the community is determined, as shown here:

1. Formally registered villages under the Local Administration Act of 1914

2. Villages established without yet receiving formal registration, but likely to qualify for registration
3. Villages established without formal registration, and lacking the capacity to be registered formally (to be relocated)
4. ‘Special category’ communities with special dispensation from the Cabinet to remain for the time being

Province	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Unclassified	Total
Chiang Mai	467	363	476	30	74	1,410
Chiang Rai	261	153	133	13	29	589
Nan	237	41	41	2	10	332
Mae Hong Son	275	63	109	16	124	587
Tak	171	88	223	15	26	523
Phayao	26	10	10	-	-	46
Lampang	30	14	42	-	-	85
Pitsanulok	56	-	1	-	-	57
Petchabun	29	10	52	3	-	94
Kamphaengphet	17	12	-	-	-	29
Kanchanaburi	72	41	14	-	-	127
Ratchburi	26	33	14	-	-	73
Total	1667	828	1,115	79	263	3,952

4. The government continues to deny the validity of traditional agricultural systems, viewing highland agricultural practices as shifting cultivation. The reality of a rotational system of swiddens involving soil regeneration without the use of artificial fertilizers is not accepted.
 - The agricultural system is not allowed to be carried out in any area declared as a protected status area – whatever that protected status maybe.

Indigenous and tribal peoples in highland areas are an integral part of Thai society, living in the land of Thailand for many generations. However the majority of Thai society, and especially the government sector, continue to view highland peoples as problems to the security of the nation, destroyers of the forest and drug traders. This incorrect stereotype, reproduced in varying forms over and over in Thai history, was used again by the government in the establishment of the Master Plan – a government policy directed primarily at indigenous and tribal communities and established in spite of the presence of the national development plan