

# “WHERE HAVE ALL THE PEOPLE GONE ?”

## Urbanization and Counter-Urbanization in Thailand\*

### ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to explode some of the prevailing *myths* regarding migration and settlement in Thailand. Between 1961 and 1982 for example, the rural population of Thailand grew from 24 to 43 million people. The question is: “where have all these people gone ?” Did they crowd and fragment the farms ? Did they lose their land and migrate to the urban areas ? Did they descend on Bangkok ? Did they crowd in its slums and squatter settlements ? Did they settle in government-sponsored rural land settlement schemes ? There is emerging evidence that they did none of these things. Where have they gone then ?

Certain misconceptions regarding migration and settlement in Thailand have gained currency over the years. Unfortunately, most of the available literature on these subjects is either too dependent on applying borrowed knowledge to the Thai situation, or too fragmentary, dealing with one facet or another and ignoring the overall picture.

This essay will use the available data, much of it improved during the past decade, to challenge these misconceptions, many of which are shared by the media, the planning agencies and the intellectual community. At the same time, we shall develop a simple overall framework for explaining the major migration and settlement patterns in the country. Unfortunately, however, the most crucial data item is missing and can only be estimated indirectly. Our main conclusion must, therefore remain an approximation, subject to some margins of error.

The starting point of our analysis focusses on a simple question. The rural population of Thailand in 1961, for example, was approximately 24 million. By 1982, given the overall growth rate for the country as a whole, this population grew by approximately 80 percent, reaching 43 million, an increase of 19 million people. The question is, where have all these people gone ?

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The answers which have generally been given to this question are listed below:

- 1: Rural population growth resulted in the reduction of farm size and in increased rural population densities.
- 2: Thailand, like other developing countries, urbanized at a rapid rate commensurate with its rate of economic growth.
- 3: Bangkok, with its very high level of primacy, grew particularly fast because of rural-urban migration.
- 4: The slums and squatter settlements of Bangkok grew even faster to absorb low-income rural migrants.
- 5: In general, most migratory movements in Thailand were typically rural-urban flows.
- 6: Excess out-migration from crowded rural areas was absorbed by government-sponsored rural land settlement schemes.

In short, according to these explanations, rural population growth was either absorbed locally, through increasing rural densities, or was diverted to the urban areas on the one hand or to land settlement schemes on the other. The question is: Does the statistical evidence support these beliefs? We shall seek to answer this question in the following discussion.

**Rural population growth resulted in the reduction of farm sizes and in increased rural population densities.**

Not true. Land fragmentation in Thailand has been minimal and the average farm size has been remarkably stable. Between the two agricultural census periods, 1963 and 1978, average farm size increased from 3.47 hectares to 3.64 hectares. The number of farms smaller than 1.6 hectares decreased from 32.8 percent of the total to 15.9 percent. The number of farms 1.6 to 6.4 hectares in size increased from 52.4 to 67.9 percent of the total, and the number of farms larger than 6.4 hectares increased from 14.9 to 15.9 percent of the total. (National Statistical Office, 1965, Table 1, p.12; and National Statistical Office, 1980, Table 1.1, p.2)

More recent data on farm sizes, assembled annually by the Center for Agricultural Statistics, show that variations in average farm sizes for the country as a whole and for each of its four main regions did not exceed 3% of the 1975-1982 period for which data is available. (Centre for Agricultural Statistics, 1984, Table 113, p.194)<sup>1</sup>

Average rural population density did not increase and appears to have decreased somewhat over the years when two sets of non-comparable data are examined. Between 1963 and 1982 the number of persons per cultivated hectare decreased from 2.2 to 2.02.<sup>2</sup> It is possible, however, that this difference was due to an under estimation of land under cultivation in 1963, and will therefore be disregarded in the ensuing discussion.

In short, rural population growth did not shrink the size of farms, nor did it increase the number of people per cultivated hectare in any major way. If farm sizes and rural population densities remained the same, where did the excess rural population go ? To the cities ?

**Thailand, like other developing countries, urbanized at a rate commensurate with its economic growth.**

It did not. Table 1 below compares Thailand with all other developing countries with populations exceeding 30 million in 1983. Of the fourteen countries in the group, Thailand ranks 5th in average annual GNP growth rate between 1965 and 1983 and 4th in terms of GNP per capita income in 1983. It ranks 2nd in terms of literacy and 5th in terms of life expectancy. Yet, while the average level of urbanization in this group was 33 percent in 1983, the urban population in Thailand was only 18 percent of the total population. This percentage ranked 12th in the group, followed only by Ethiopia and Bangladesh, the two poorest countries in the group by all measures of development.

The percentage of the population living in urban areas in Thailand is lower than that of China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and Egypt, even though it has a higher per capita income. In short, Thailand remains remarkably rural, while its economy has been developing at a rapid rate.

In one sense only did Thailand urbanize at a rate commensurate with its level of economic growth-Bangkok, its primate city, has grown into one of the largest urban centers in the world and is now a fully modernized metropolis with strong linkages to provincial centers as well as to the international urban network. Except for Bangkok, there are no cities to speak of in the country. In 1979, the population of Bangkok was 59 times that of the next largest city, Chiang Mai (United Nations, 1982, p.20) Thailand thus leads the group in terms of its level of concentration of the urban population. Sixty-nine percent of its urban population is in Bangkok, compared to an average of 27 percent for the group. This may be the chief reason why the myth continues to exist. Looking at Bangkok metropolis it appears as though Thailand is urbanizing but in reality it is barely urbanizing at all.

**Bangkok, with its very high level of primacy, grew particularly fast because of rural urban migration**

Not really. During the 1960-1970 period, Bangkok had a net gain of 260,000 in-migrants, while the other regions in the country experienced net losses (United Nations, 1976, p.16). This amounts to an average of 26,000 persons per year. More recently, during 1972-1982 the average migration flow into Bangkok from all other areas averaged 60,260 per annum (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 1983, p.109).

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**Table 1: Comparison of Development Indicators for All Developing Countries with Populations Exceeding 30 million in 1983 (1)**

Country	Population mid-1983 (millions)	GNP per Capita 1983	GNP Ave Annual growth rate 1965-83 (percent)	Life expectancy at birth 1983 (Years)	Adult Literacy 1980 (percent)	Urban Population As % of total population 1984	Urban Population In largest city, 1980
China	1,019.1 (1) (2)	300 (11)	4.4 (4)	67 (8)	.69 (6)	21 (12)	6 (15)
India	733.2 (2)	260 (12)	1.5 (13)	36 (11)	.36 (11)	24 (9)	6 (14)
Indonesia	155.7 (3)	560 (9)	5.0 (2)	62 (7)	.62 (8)	24 (9)	23 (9)
Brazil	129.7 (4)	1,880 (3)	5.0 (3)	76 (3)	.76 (4)	71 (1)	15 (13)
Bangladesh	95.5 (5)	130 (13)	0.5 (14)	26 (13)	.26 (13)	17 (14)	30 (6)
Nigeria	93.6 (6)	770 (6)	3.2 (7)	34 (12)	.34 (12)	22 (11)	17 (12)
Pakistan	89.7 (7)	390 (10)	2.5 (11)	24 (14)	.24 (14)	29 (7)	21 (11)
Mexico	75.0 (8)	2,240 (1)	3.2 (7)	66 (6)	.83 (3)	69 (2)	32 (5)
Philippines	52.1 (9)	760 (7)	2.9 (10)	75 (4)	.75 (5)	39 (6)	30 (6)
Thailand	49.2 (10)	820 (5)	4.3 (5)	86 (2)	.86 (2)	18 (13)	69 (1)
Turkey	47.3 (11)	1,240 (4)	3.0 (9)	60 (9)	.60 (9)	45 (4)	24 (8)
Egypt	45.2 (12)	700 (8)	4.2 (6)	44 (10)	.44 (10)	45 (3)	39 (3)
Ethiopia	40.9 (13)	120 (15)	0.5 (14)	15 (15)	.15 (15)	15 (15)	37 (4)
Korea, Rep. of	40.0 (14)	2,010 (2)	6.7 (1)	93 (1)	.93 (1)	62 (3)	41 (2)
Burma	35.5 (15)	180 (13)	2.2 (12)	66 (6)	.66 (7)	29 (7)	23 (9)
Average	180.1	824	3.3	55	.57	35.3	27.5

Source: World Bank, (1983), Table 1, pp.174-175, Table 22, pp.216-217, and Table 25, pp.222-223

(1) Excluding Iran and Vietnam for which data are not available.

(2) Numbers in parantheses refer to rank, from the highest to the lowest in the group.

**Table 2: Population growth rates and net migration (lows in Thailand, 1972-1982.)**

	Thailand	Rural	Urban	Bangkok	Other Urban
1972 Population	38,359,008	32,775,667	5,583,341	3,829,148	1,754,193
1982 Population	48,846,927	39,956,787	8,890,140	5,468,206	3,421,854
Ave. Annual Growth Rate	2.446%	2.001%	4.762%	3.627%	6.912%
Ave. Annual Net Migration Rate (1)	—	-0.445%	+2.316%	1.181%	4.466%
Ave. Annual Net Migration Flows (1)	—	-161,000	+161,000	+53,000	+108,000

Source: National Statistical Office, (1972-1983).

(1) Calculated by assuming an identical natural growth rate for all regions.

A similar number, 53,000 per year, was obtained by averaging net migration streams for the country as a whole between 1972 and 1982, as shown in Table 2 below. This amounts to half the natural growth rate for Bangkok for this period, excluding in-migration, which was approximately 110,000 per annum. Assuming an equal population growth rate for all areas, we find that there was a net out-migration flow from the rural areas into the urban areas, averaging 161,000 persons per year. Bangkok absorbed one third of the rural migrants, while other urban areas, mainly provincial centers, absorbed twice as many migrants. These secondary urban centers are now growing twice as fast as Bangkok, and have absorbed between 1972 and 1982 more rural migrants, in absolute numbers, than Bangkok did.

Thus Bangkok, although it is much larger than other cities, is growing largely due to its natural growth and not due to migration. Between 1961 and 1982 it could not have absorbed more than one million migrants. All together, urban areas as a whole could not have absorbed more than 3 million in-migrants out of the increase of 19 million in the rural areas during this period.

To put it another way, let us consider that there were approximately 50,000 villages in Thailand in 1972, with an average population of 650 persons per village. The numbers presented above imply that, on average, Bangkok received one person per village per year, or alternatively, one family of five every five years. In other words, 10,000 families migrated into Bangkok every year from 50,000 villages, while 6,500,000 families stayed in the rural areas. Other urban areas received two persons per village per year. Of a total of 20 persons added to the village population every year, one left for Bangkok, two for other urban areas, and 17 stayed in the rural areas. Given these figures, it is hard to imagine how anyone could expect the level of migration from the village to Bangkok to be influenced by any village-level development efforts.

Yet most discussions of plans to solve the problems of slums and squatter settlements in Bangkok are usually dominated by technocrats and intellectuals who fear that anything done to ameliorate slum problems will further accelerate the already large flow of migrants into Bangkok. Recommendations inevitably focus on village-level rural development, encouraging people to stay in the villages. To the extent that village-level education or infrastructure development have been successful it is not at all clear whether they convinced more people to stay in the village or to come to Bangkok. At any rate, as the above data shows, there is hardly any rural migration into Bangkok at this time that could be affected by the migration prevention strategies of Bangkok-based planners and public opinion makers.

**The slums and squatter settlements of Bangkok grew even faster to absorb low-income rural migrants.**

Not true. A recent study compared the number of slum dwellers between 1974 and 1984 using extensive air photograph coverage of the entire Bangkok Metropolitan

Region. Initial results from this study show that the slum and squatter population increased from 890,000 to 1,100,000 during this period (National Housing Authority, 1983, p.6).

If the slum population had grown at the same rate as the average annual growth rate of the population as a whole, a conservative assumption, it would have grown from 890,000 in 1974 to 1,162,000 in 1984. This number is somewhat larger than the estimated slum population in 1984, suggesting that there may have been a net out-migration from the slums to other forms of housing. More people left the slums than moved in, and the slums barely absorbed their own natural population growth, let alone the rural migrants. If rural migrants moved into the slums, older residents had to evacuate them to make room for them. In terms of absolute numbers, it was the formal housing sector that absorbed the migratory flows, as well as the substantial expansion of the number of households in the city during this period. The private housing sector was able to meet most housing demand in Bangkok by adding an impressive 88% to the private housing stock during this period, amounting to 270,000 units. Public housing added an additional 65,000 units. Slum and squatter houses, which formed 23.64% of the housing stock in 1974, amounted to only 18.50% of the stock in 1984 (National Housing Authority, 1983, Table 1, p.4). The overall housing situation in the city improved and the average quality of housing increased over the past decade. It was able to do so because there was an effective demand for housing and an active housing production sector, but also because migration levels into Bangkok were exceptionally low.

Yet Bangkokians continue to lament the deteriorating housing situation and the rapid growth of slums and squatter settlements. One wonders what the city would look like if the excess rural population really did migrate into Bangkok. Its size could easily be double what it is now, if not more. Instead of leisurely coping with its slow growth rate, it would have to face the problems of Cairo and Mexico City, considerably more acute ones than those it has to face today.

**In general, most migratory movements in Thailand were typically rural-urban flows.**

By this time, the reader should be able to guess that most migratory movements in Thailand were from one rural area to another. This interesting fact was discovered during the 1970 Census of Population, but was naturally relegated to a minor standing in a field dominated by urban-based researchers concerned primarily with migration into cities. This is typical. Most migration studies the world over continue to treat rural areas as a source of urban migrants, rarely bothering to examine the nature of inter-rural flows. Sample surveys, such as the one quoted below, often fail to account for all inter-rural flows, particularly when the destinations of rural migrants are in remote and inaccessible areas, where census personnel may not feel as

comfortable as in established villages and towns.

A sample study of the 1970 Census of Population questioned respondents as to their place of previous residence within the five-year period preceding the survey. The findings show that

“the rural to urban migration stream, to which special attention is usually paid, constituted only about one tenth of all five-year migration in Thailand” (United Nations, 1983, p.31).

Of a total of more than 3.3 million moves during this period, more than 77 percent were into rural places, amounting to more than half a million moves per year.<sup>3</sup>

These movements to rural destinations must explain why the rural population stayed in the rural area and did not move into cities. Since farm sizes and rural population densities remained largely the same, the excess rural population must have had access to new land. Is it possible, then, that the government-sponsored land settlement schemes provided sufficient land for new rural settlement ?

**Excess out migration from crowded rural areas was absorbed by government sponsored rural land settlement schemes.**

Impossible. By 1982, State-directed land settlement programs, including self-help land settlement schemes, cooperative land settlements, land allocation programmes, war veteran settlement projects, land development projects, forest villages and forest community development projects settled a grand total of 230,727 farm families, or 1,153,000 persons (Uhlig, 1984, p.39).

Considering the average village in 1972 once again, this implies that government-sponsored land settlement programs absorbed one person out of the total village population of 650 in any given year, or a family of five persons once every five years. Of a total of 20 persons added to the village population each year, one left for Bangkok, two for other urban centers and one for a land settlement scheme. Where did the other sixteen go ?

Rephrasing our question again: Between 1961 and 1982, the 1961 rural population grew by 19 million people. About four million were absorbed by Bangkok, other urban areas and government-sponsored land settlement schemes. Where did the other 15 million go ?

The answer is that the rest were pioneer settlers who cleared land in government-owned forests and settled there illegally. These squatters were by no means hill tribes practicing shifting cultivation. They were rice farmers who went into the upland areas and engaged in upland rice subsistence farming. but most of all in cash crop farming. While in earlier years they did indeed practice shifting cultivation and commuted between their home base and their newly-cleared farms, they gradually settled permanently on the land, growing annual cash crops—mainly cassava, maize, mung beans and sugarcane—but rubber, coconuts, fruits, palm oil and market vegetables as well.

“Agriculture in the squatter area is clearly commercialized as opposed to subsistence... Incomes vary considerably between years of good and poor rainfall, and between rich and poor soil. But on average, as pointed out in the World Bank economic report, upland farmers growing commodities for export have higher incomes than the rainfed rice farmers in the valleys. Average net annual incomes vary from about 12,000 Baht (US\$530) per household up to 25,000 (US\$1,100) in the most productive areas” (Agricultural Land Reform Office, 1980).

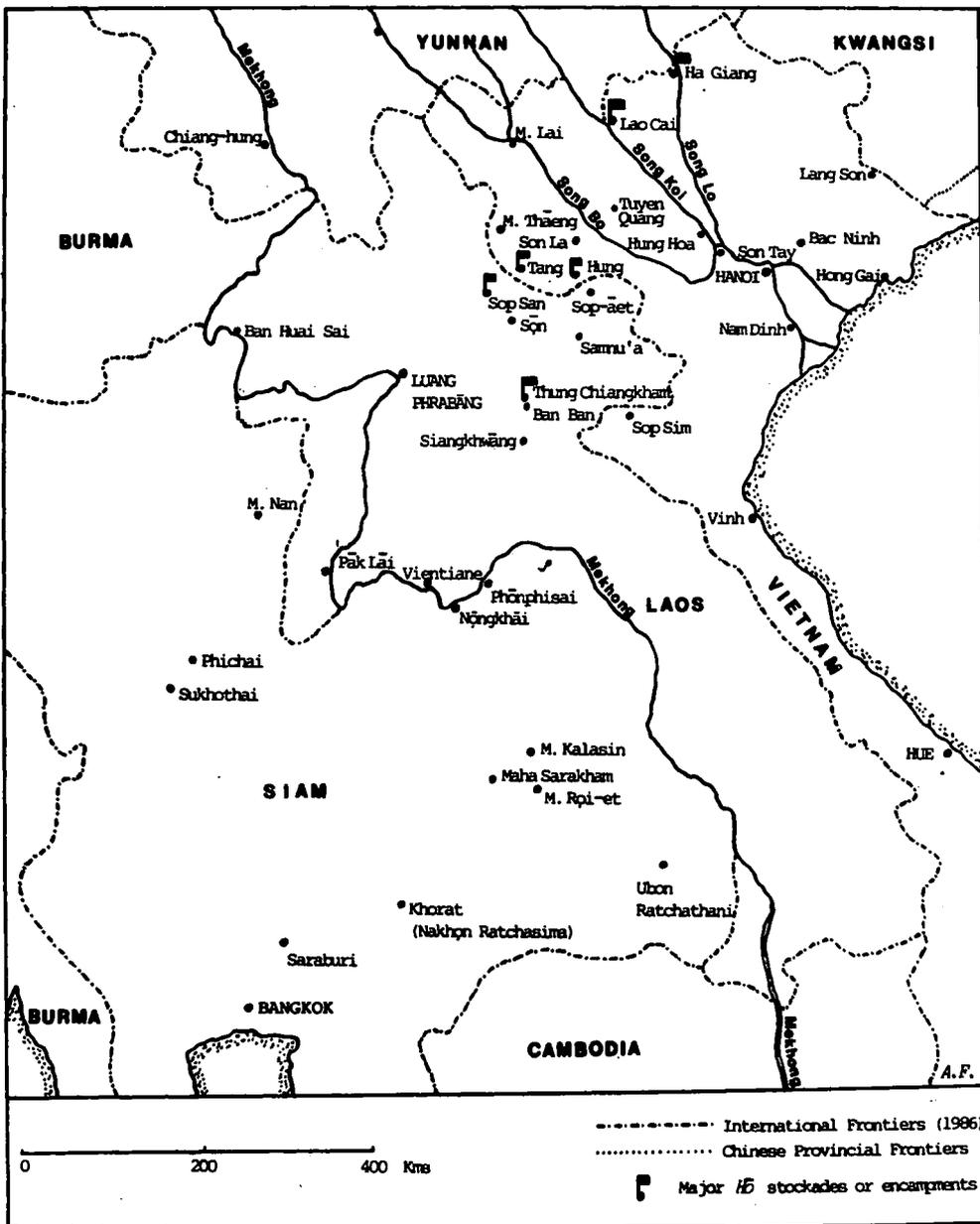
“The Thai upland farmer does not fit the stereotype of the peasant farmer clinging to his traditional ways in the face of economic advantage. He is in most cases a migrant from overcrowded rice valleys, with all the quantities of diligence, determination and culture-group support typical of immigrant populations everywhere.... The high proportion of dynamic farmers in the population is evident from the statistic that presently 40 percent of the Thai farmers are officially considered illegal squatters on public land, mostly forest reserve” (The Asian Strategies Company, 1982).

While there are no published statistics on this subject, and while the above quote is the only reference found to such a large number of squatters, forty percent of a total rural population of 40 million in 1982 does indeed amount to 16 million people. Is it possible that so many people settled spontaneously and illegally in cleared forests ?

Unfortunately, as noted earlier, population data on this key question is non-existent. We shall have to limit ourselves to gross estimates, based on land use data. These estimates are no doubt subject to some margins of error.

To begin with, Thailand experienced a severe rate of deforestation, averaging 2.5% of the forested area during the period in question. Forest cover was reduced by 11,035,000 hectares, from 27,365,000 in 1961 to 16,330,000 in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

Not all of the deforested areas were farmed on a regular basis. Between 1961 and 1978, two periods for which air and satellite photographs are available, a total of 9,845,000 hectares were cleared, but apparently only 6,125,000 hectares were being farmed, roughly two-thirds of the deforested area. (Thai University Research Association, n.d., Tables 4-1 to 4-5). The rest was either lying idle or abandoned. This suggests that the average increase in cultivated area on cleared forest between 1961 and 1978 was of the order of 360,000 hectares per annum. Between 1978 and 1982, the cultivated area grew by an average of 335,000 hectares per annum, according to official



statistics. (Centre for Agricultural Statistics, 1984, Table 113, p.194)

The extent of forest encroachment in 1978 is shown in the map presented below. It extends over the entire country in small pockets as well as in massive contiguous areas.

All together population density per cultivated hectare in 1978 and in 1982 was almost identical -2.0 persons per hectare. (Centre for Agricultural Statistics, 1984, Table 113, p.194 and national Statistical Office 1975 and 1983). Given this density for the cultivated area on encroached forest, we can estimate the number of people who settled on cleared forest. This number will include most government-sponsored settlements as well, almost all of which were on land initially cleared by squatters.

Each year between 1961 and 1978, 720,000 persons settled in cleared forests, and 660,000 persons settled in cleared forests each year between 1978 and 1982, bringing the total to 14,920,000 persons. Considering that additional people squatted on government land which was not designated as forest, the above figures do appear to account for the majority of farmers. It thus becomes quite clear where the farmers have gone. They have cleared the forest and settled there. (See Figure 1)

While other countries urbanized, the Thai population counter-urbanized, moving away from the urban areas into remote forests and creating new settlements. Its scale of counter-urbanization was unequalled by any other country during this period, both in relative and in absolute terms. Within the country itself, spontaneous settlement far outstripped government-sponsored land settlement, settling 12 and more times as many people as did the official programs since their inception. This massive settlement movement accounts for the inter-rural flows discovered in the migration surveys in 1970, as well as for the bulk of forest clearance during this period.

In conclusion, two questions need to be addressed: (1) How was such a massive counter-urbanization possible? and (2) Were we to rewrite this essay twenty years hence, are we likely to reach the same conclusions?

The answer to the first question is simpler. Rural population densities in Thailand were traditionally low and there was a land reserve available for extensive cultivation. Intensive road building during the Vietnam war period and afterwards opened up new areas for cultivation which had previously been inaccessible. The Forestry Department responsible for the Thai forests insisted on maintaining control over large areas of the country, though in fact it could not really exercise effective

control. Illegal logging and corrupt forest supervision opened up the forests for settlers. Military concern with communist insurgency took precedence over the enforcement of trespassing laws, and squatters were tolerated and rarely evicted lest they become alienated and join forces with insurgents. The military often encouraged settlers to inhabit newly secured areas, to increase the presence of people sympathetic to the government. The issue of illegality was never really taken seriously by farmers who had been clearing land for settlement long before the new forest conservation laws came into existence. Farmers could not be expected to respect laws which, from their point of view, transformed them from legitimate homesteaders into illegal squatters.

Upland soils proved better suited than had been initially anticipated to extensive cultivation methods, and to the production of cash crops. Between 1961 and 1982 the area planted with sugar cane, maize, mung beans and cassava grew from a mere 567,000 hectares to 4,000,000 hectares, and the value of annual production increased from US\$86 million to more than US\$1 billion, creating new world markets for Thai agricultural exports (Agricultural Statistics Section 1962, Table 14, p.42; and Center for Agricultural Statistics, 1984, Table 1, p.1). The economic contribution of the settlers did not go unheeded, and in many places their presence on the land was accepted as an established fact.

In general, lack of respect for the law, a lenient attitude on the part of government, insufficient manpower to police the forests, and the energy and creativity propelling the squatter movement made wholesale eviction impossible. Needless to say, given the number of settlers, the duration of their stay on the land and the fundamental change in the use of their land from forest to agriculture, there is absolutely no question that the large majority are there to stay.

The second question, 'will our conclusions hold true twenty years hence?' is more difficult to answer. We can only sketch a few lines for thought. First of all, it is patently clear that the remaining forests cannot sustain another onslaught such as occurred in the preceding decades. Logging has largely come to an end and Thailand now imports wood from abroad. There are disagreements concerning the amount of land still available for cultivation. One study estimates that there are still pockets of land suitable for cultivation, of the order of 4.5 million hectares. The remaining forest of 16.0 million hectares is largely on sloped land deemed unsuitable for agriculture (Thai University Research Association, n.d., Tables 4-1 to 4-5). The extension of land under cultivation is likely to continue at a slower pace, but to eventually come to a halt. At the same time, the slow expansion of the markets for upland crops, which is already experiencing a severe and prolonged slump, may make further incursion into the forest

less profitable to prospective encroachers.

There is considerable pressure on the Forestry Department to de-gazette forests, and a number of government plans to improve the land tenure status of the rural squatters. Some efforts are now under way to concentrate the defence of the remaining forests on a limited number of defensible perimeters, largely around the larger forests which can sustain wildlife. Rural development efforts concentrating on the villages surrounding these perimeters, involving them in forest conservation and agro-forestry and using them as a shield to prevent further incursions may prove effective in protecting the forests. There is a growing awareness of the need to protect the environment and a somewhat more coordinated movement to relinquish the unrealistic forestry practices of the past and to concentrate efforts where they are likely to yield results.

Thailand's population is expected to double in size and reach 100 million before it stabilizes at that level. However, due to very effective birth control programs in the recent past, the current population growth rate is only 1.7% per annum, making it possible for the economy to continue to grow, even at a slower rate than before, without reducing overall living standards. It is quite possible that population densities will increase in the rural areas, and that retaining people in the rural areas in the future will be more difficult. It stands to reason that some of the myths discussed above will raise their heads again. Land productivity in the rural areas will have to increase if the land is to sustain the increased population densities.

This increase in productivity should not prove impossible given the solid base of single family farms created in the preceding period, the infrastructure and services installed throughout the country, the experience gained in new cropping patterns and in the use of machinery and other agricultural inputs, and the flexibility and creativity of the Thai farmers. If Thai agriculture remains flexible and responsive to changing world markets and domestic conditions, it is quite likely to meet the challenges of the future as well as it has done in the recent past.

At the same time, growing rural population densities are likely to create new rural-urban migration pressures, and urban areas are likely to receive the excess rural population that cannot be supported on the farm. Urban areas should be well prepared, therefore, to receive rural migrants in the next two decades. While it has been possible to hold back rural-urban migration in the past, it may be more difficult to do so in the future. There is no doubt that urban areas are now better able to absorb larger numbers of rural migrants than before. There is considerable infrastructure in place and sufficient land to accomodate migrants. The central problem facing the country,

like many other countries, will be the expansion of employment opportunities. While other countries with economies similar to Thailand created a solid base for industrialization, Thailand remained largely agricultural and built a solid infrastructure for agricultural development. It is difficult to tell whether this path will prove useful in the coming years, or whether it will put the country at a competitive disadvantage vis-a-vis other developing countries which were industrializing more rapidly in the recent past.

It is important to build future development strategies on the assets that were developed during the past two decades, mainly on the single-family farm system that was consolidated during this period. These farms, and the farmers that inhabit them, form a solid base for future agricultural development. They need to be strengthened by better land tenure arrangements that would allow them improved access to capital without risk of losing their land to exploitative money lenders, and that would encourage them to take better care of the soil, to plant perennial crops and trees, and to engage in gradual reforestation. The single-family farm system also holds great promise for furthering the process of democratization in the country, and for building a strong rural power base. These invisible and rather individualistic farmers hold great potential as a base for a broad-based democratic movement, one which would increase government support to farmers, remove barriers to their access to new markets and meet their articulated demands for a more equitable distribution of public resources.

Finally, it is hardly likely that intensive government involvement in rural development projects, such as land settlement schemes, will yield dramatic results at the necessary scale. Government intervention must be restricted to a supportive and facilitating role, enabling the people themselves to make the necessary production decisions and to adapt to changing circumstances as they see fit. At the same time, the government must prescribe effective regulations for protecting the remaining forest, and be able to restrain encroachment into lands unsuitable for long-term agriculture.

In more general terms, government efforts

“... should be focussed on areas in which the government has a comparative advantage, namely the development of roads and other infrastructure, including facilities for health and sanitation, and the orderly processing of homestead claims. Indeed, (government) policy might well benefit from the more general prescription of Adam Smith to engage in the definition and enforcement of property rights and to finance investment of appropriate public works and institutions”  
(James and Roumasset, 1984, p.60)

The spontaneous settlement movement in Thailand during recent decades, coupled with the rapid development of the economy and the strengthening of the single-family

farm system are but another demonstration of the accidental, or more precisely the unpredictable, nature of the development process in specific historical circumstances. What the future holds will remain sealed until it gradually manifests itself. Just as the myths advanced in the past did not hold true, the ones advanced today are just as likely to be pointing in the wrong direction. All in all, however, the people of Thailand have been able to meet the challenges of population growth in the past. They have now created a solid base for continuing to meet them in the future.

*Shlomo Angel*

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. The data assembled by the Center differs somewhat from the Census data, citing 4.32 hectares as the average farm size for 1978, 18.8% larger than the Census figure.
2. Calculated by dividing the 1963 rural population, interpolated from 1960 and 1970 census data, by the amount of cultivated land measured in the 1963 Census of Agriculture, and comparing it to 1982 population estimates divided by cultivated land figures released by the Center for Agricultural Statistics. See Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (1976), p.13; National Statistical office (1965), Table 1, p.12; Center for Agricultural Statistics (1984), Table 113, p.194; and National Statistical Office (1983).
3. Based on sample data from the 1970 Population Census. Data were taken from Arnold, F. and Boonpratuang, S. (1976), p.39.
4. Calculated from Food and Agricultural Organization (1981), pp.434-435; and Royal Forestry Department (1981).

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