This study examines people-centred Thai NGOs trying to help peasants empower themselves in order to compete better in conflicts over land, water, forest, and capital, during the 1970s to 1990s. The study investigates how the NGOs contested asymmetric power relations among government officials, private entrepreneurs and ordinary people while helping raise the peoples confidence in their own power to negotiate their demands with other actors.

The thesis argues that the NGOs are able to play an interventionist role when a number of key factors coexist. First, the NGOs are able to understand loci situations which contain asymmetric power relations between different actors, in relation to current changes in the wider context of the Thai political economy and seize the time to take action. Secondly, the NGOs are able to articulate a social meaning beyond the dominating rhetoric of the 'state' and the 'capitalists' which encourages the people's, participation in collective activities. Thirdly, while dealing with one problem in social relations and negotiation with local environment, the NGOs are able to recognise new problems as they arise and rapidly identify a new political space for the actors to renegotiate their conflicting interests and demands. Fourthly, the NGOs are able to recreate new meanings, new actors and reform their organisations and networks to deal with new situations. Finally, the NGOs are able to effectively use three pillars of their movement, namely individuals, organisations and networks to deal with everyday politics and collective protest.

The case studies in three villages in Northern Thailand reveal that the NGOs were able to play an interventionist role in specific situations through their alternate development strategies somewhat influenced by structural Marxism. The thesis recommends that the NGO interventionist role be continued so as to overcome tensions within the NGO community, for instance, between the NGOs working at the grassroots level and the NGOs working at regional and national levels (including NGO funding agencies); local everyday conflicts; and the bipolar views of a society among the NGOs expressed in dichotomous thinking between 'rural' and 'urban', 'community' and 'state', conflict and order, actor and system.

The fragmentation of NGO social and environmental movements showed that there is no single formula or easy solution to the problems. If the NGOs want to continue their interventionist role to help empower
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