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# Ethnic Minorities and Food Security in Northern Thailand

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# **Ethnic Minorities and Food Security in Northern Thailand**

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November 2011  
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Advisor: Nikoi Kote-Nikoi

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### List of Abbreviations

Children of Southeast Asia: COSA

Thai Burma Border Consortium: TBBC

## **Abstract**

The issue of food security is complex. By analyzing the relationship between international, national and local society, one can better contextualize food security issues. Using an embedded research design (with a qualitative leaning) supported by quantitative data, research is conducted via surveys, interviews and focus groups. This research design was chosen to offset limited sample sizes with quantitative data to strengthen findings.

Research findings were cross analyzed to identify three emergent themes. The three cross-cutting themes identified and analyzed are: Thai citizenship, employment and chemical pesticide use (chemical pesticide use did not arise among Burmese refugees and is only applicable to hill tribe, Thai and NGO workers). Research indicates lack of access to Thai citizenship has led to high unemployment rates and increased participation in high-risk informal job sectors. Lastly, hill tribe, Thai and NGO workers report an increase in chemical pesticide use negatively affecting the natural world and household abilities to secure local food sources. Thailand's economic shift away from small-scale family farms to commercial production has increased pesticide usage negatively impacting households. This shift away from small scale farming has particularly affected women as it is their cultural role to prepare food for the family. Statistics show an increase in female labor participation in informal sectors as women are working more to secure food sources. Policy recommendations include increasing access to Thai citizenship and employment opportunities (especially for women) to create household food security for non-Thai nationals.

## **Introduction and Background Information**

### **Children of Southeast Asia**

Children of Southeast Asia (COSA) is a small-scale youth center and shelter dedicated to the prevention of child trafficking in Southeast Asia. It is located in Mae Rim, Thailand. COSA targets high-risk youth vulnerable to sex trafficking, labor exploitation, or both. COSA determines the level of the child's vulnerability through one-on-one interviews, citizenship status, family history and socio-economic status. Specific criteria include determining whether the youth has already been trafficked, whether an underage sibling has been trafficked or is currently working, and adaptability to a new lifestyle.

Currently, COSA is home to 15 young women, though the organization plans to house up to 20 girls in the future. COSA exists to create new educational opportunities for at-risk youth and to raise awareness around child trafficking. In addition, COSA also helps hill tribe communities access Thai citizenship. Mickey Choothesea, co-director and co-founder, writes COSA's main objective is "to promote social welfare at 'grass root' levels to solve social and environmental issues. Working from a participatory and democratic framework with members of the community, COSA aims to develop self-management skills in socio-economic strengthening programs."

### **Sustainable Development Intern: Roles and Responsibilities at COSA**

As a Sustainable Development student with a focus on Food Security, I assisted with the development of the organic farm. Completed projects include: the construction of a mushroom greenhouse, the restoration of a fruit orchard, soil restoration, the research and design of an irrigation system, and management of COSA's organic farm.



While my initial task was to secure food sources, which could provide up to 80% of COSAs food needs, poor environmental conditions prevented reaching this goal. Crops harvested were not edible due to a variety of reasons: poor soil quality, flooding, low seed germination, poor seed quality, lack of knowledge of Thai farming seasons/local practices, extreme weather patterns, inability to speak the local language, and little to no financial resources. I found I was unable to provide COSA with a secure food source, which shaped my research direction and inquiry question.

## Hill Tribes

Thailand’s hill tribe communities are scattered across twenty provinces though 90% are concentrated in the western and northern region. Hill tribes are descendent from Laos, Burma, Southern China (with roots in Nepal and Tibet), and Cambodia. Figure 1 illustrates the ethnic diversity of Thailand’s hill tribe populations:

Group	Total Village	Total Household	Total Population	
<b>Karen tribe</b>	2,630-2,960	70,890-80,000	476,570-510,000	
<b>Hmong tribe</b>	260-290	15,700-15,810	126,300-128,100	
<b>Mien tribe</b>	195-240	9,540-11,790	48,400-58,750	
<b>Akha tribe</b>	270-335	9,800-13,050	56,600-65,250	
<b>Lahu tribe</b>	446-531	15,400-21,200	85,845-127,200	
<b>Lisu tribe</b>	161-236	5,650-8,260	35,600-42,000	
<b>Total</b>	3,962-4,592	126,980-150,110	829,315-931,300	

Source: Life Development Center, <http://www.ldcl.org>

**Figure 1: Hill Tribe Population**

According to Joseph Aguetant (1996), author of “Impact of Population Registration on Hill Tribe Development,” reports, “ [In the] most recent survey reported by the Tribal Research Institute (TRI) in July 1995, the hill tribe population in Thailand stands at 694,720 persons

distributed in 119,216 households and 3,695 villages...However, these data should be judged with circumspection because upland Thai people in general are undercounted” (p. 48). There is currently no formalized method registering hill tribes, a fundamental reason explaining social and legal underrepresentation, “The living conditions of hill tribe people are still substandard in both social and economic terms. In 1983, a large-scale survey indicated that the average per capita income of the hill tribes was far below the poverty line” (Arguettant, 1993, p. 49). The question of whether indigenous people should become full citizens is a current debate.

Arguettant (1993) states, “the need for their recognition has been stressed by the hill tribe people themselves. Almost all (90%) of them declare that holding Thai citizenship is first on their list of priorities, for it provides access to land rights, education and professions open only to Thai nationals” (p. 47).

## Thailand’s Refugees

While hill tribes face significant challenges, so too, do Burmese refugees and migrants. The case of refugees remains even more complex with even fewer resources and employment opportunities. According to the *Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)*, a refugee is a “person that has a well-founded fear of persecution and has crossed an international border” (2008, p. 12). While Burmese refugees and migrants can be found across Thailand, the majority are found along the Thai-Burma border, “over 138,000 people currently reside in thirteen camps scattered along the Thai-Burma border” (Caouette & Pack, 2002, p. 7). In 2000, the number of Burmese migrants recognized by the Thai government reached two million, nearly double the number in 1998 (Caouette & Pack, 2002, p. 7). Therese Coquette and Mary Pack (2002)

summarize the existence of Burmese refugees in Thailand in their book (in collaboration with the Open Society Institute) *Pushing Past the Definition: Migration from Burma to Thailand:*

*Recent estimates indicate that up to two million people from Burma currently reside in Thailand, reflecting one of the largest migration flows in Southeast Asia. Many factors contribute to this mass exodus, but the vast majority of people leaving Burma are clearly fleeing persecution, fear and human rights abuses.(p. 1).*

Burmese refugees are escaping civil war, political persecution and/or social, economic and cultural abuses, “For the most part, the various types of human rights violations are intertwined and impossible to separate” (Caouette & Pack, 2003, p. 1). Once in Thailand, Burmese refugees are classified into specific categories that determine legal status, the level of support and assistance available to them, and the degree of protection under international law. However, these classifications are misleading and “distort the grave circumstances surrounding this migration by failing to take into account the realities that have brought people across the border” (Caouette & Pack, 2003, p. 1).

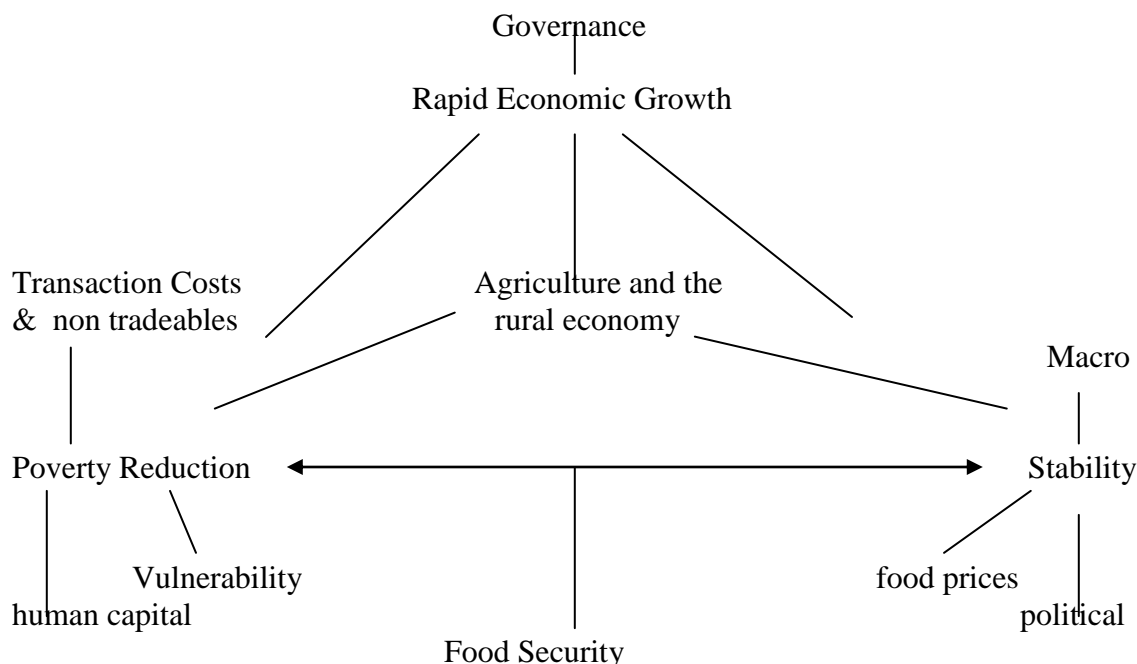
I have examined a small population sample of Burmese refugees residing in Mae La Refugee camp, home to an estimated 40,000-90,000 people from all over Burma. Mae La camp receives the majority of food, shelter, and non-food items from The Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). TBBC was established in 1984 as an informal collaboration of NGOs providing assistance to refugees, “the assumption was that one day they (refugees) would go home and the Consortium would be dissolved but, until then, TBBC would endeavor to make sure their basic needs were met” (2008, p.1). The prolonged fighting in Burma caused TBBC to change priorities, “from one of strengthening and sustaining services whilst waiting for change to

reorienting all activities to promote change and durable solutions” enabling more dignified independent lives in the camps (TBBC, 2008, p. 1).

In 2005, international communities began voicing concerns about refugee camps and lack of assistance and structure in registering for citizenship. As public pressure mounted, the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) and United Nations High Commissions of Refugees (UNHCR) also began to challenge the Royal Thai government advocating for education, job training and/or resettlement. In 2006, refugee border camps were permitted to start seeking resettlement to “Third Countries” (TBBC, 2008, p.1).

## **Literature Review**

I will review a broad range of literature analyzing international, national and local levels of society with relation to food security. To illustrate the relationship between society (at the household level) and food security, I am using a diagram created by Peter Timmer (2004), a global expert researcher on Asian food security. Timmer reports that “rapid growth in the macro economy must be designed to reach the poor” while also “raising poor households above the poverty line” (2004, p. 7). In addition, price stabilization must occur in order to create sustainable access to food sources at all times. Timmer’s diagram suggests food security cannot be obtained by increasing household incomes alone, both international and national price stabilization must occur in tandem with increasing household income to ensure food security.



**Figure 2. A Macro Perspective on the Determinants of Food Security: The Three “Spheres” of Activity, Held Together by Agriculture and the Rural Economy**

## International Literature

Lindsay Falvey (2004), author of, “Reconceiving Food Security and Environmental Protection” defines food security as “informed confidence of all persons in a self-identified group within a society of their ability to access adequate nutritious food for their families at all times” (p. 14). Falvey suggests that international food security acts as “two separate activities...self sufficient (growing) and commercial (growing)” (2004, p. 25). Falvey states development approaches to global food security follows an industrial market model. The most recognized model used on the macro level is the International Food Policy Research Institute model or IFPRI. The IFPRI model bases food security on the basic supply and demand theory, which assumes that “good governance is an outcome of development...it also assumes, while noting negative effects, that free markets and free trade exist, and that agriculture can be viewed as similar to any other industry” (Falvey, 2004, p. 15). The reality is that this economic model is what is followed by large international institutions who dominate the food arena. Falvey

examines the World Food Programme and USAID claiming their approaches are very similar to one another yet distinctly different from IFPRI. Falvey writes:

*USAID notes that more than 20 million US citizens are food-insecure at any one time, although its policy does not appear to relate this to social factors, and bases its international macroeconomic approaches without reference to human or nature rights. It concludes that the private sector is key to food security in a free market that will stimulate widespread economic growth and thus provide income 'to help assure that the global economy has access to the agricultural abundance of the United States (2004, p.15).*

Globally, about 73 million people are being added to the world's population every year, most of whom are likely to be in lowest developing countries (LDC) (Falvey, 2004, p. 15). As a consequence of these trends, almost all marginal increases in the demand for food globally will come from the LDC's. The IFPRI model acknowledges and predicts six factors that may affect the model's success: new evidence on nutrition and policy, low food prices, trade negotiations, biotechnological advances, information technology and the potential of agro ecological approaches.

Falvey asks that this narrow economic view of food production be expanded into larger philosophical questions that include food security and the environment from a wider perspective. Falvey advocates for the inclusion of seven other factors also critical to food security: grain volumes stored across years, agriculturally induced environmental degradation, human and ecosystem rights, differing policy requirements of subsistence and commercial agriculture, self-sufficient agriculture as the essence of food security, the role of food as a basic right before its consideration as a commodity. The inclusion of the environment and one's basic right to food

opens the food security debate by distinguishing the separate activities of self-sufficiency farming and commercial farming. Falvey (2004) concludes that food security development is faced with the continuation of commercial farming or switching back to small scale self-sufficiency farming, “The IFPRI model produces the first view while the second view is the wider argument presented” (2004, p.26). While both ideologies hold there is enough food produced to feed the world, they differ in the ways which food can be grown and produced.

In Thailand, the clash between food security ideologies presents itself in the current food debate taking place between the current King, H.M King Bhuipol, and Parliament. The King and big business leaders agree that food security is necessary, yet the methods proposed to achieve food security diverge in production.

Peter Warr’s (2007) short journal, “The Economics of Enough: Thailand’s ‘Sufficiency Economy’ Debate,” outlines the clash between modernity and tradition noted in the contrasting ideologies. Sufficiency economy is akin to the conservative fiscal philosophy used by Thailand until business ventures represent the modernist philosophy. Warr reports that Thailand’s economic performance over the last four decades is summarized below to illustrate the shift of real GDP:

*I – Pre-boom: 1968 to 1986 (3.9 per cent per year)*

*II – Boom: 1987 to 1996 (8.0 per cent per year)*

*III – Crisis: 1997 to 1999 (-3.6 per cent per year)*

*IV – Recovery: 2000 to 2007 (4.3 per cent per year) (2007, p.5)*

After the economic crash in 1997 and the international decline of the Thai Baht (which forced Thailand to accept a IMF structural readjustment package) the King enforced the Sufficiency Economy philosophy, which reduces dependency on commercial production for food. Five

central themes inform H.M. King Bhuipol's Sufficiency Economy philosophy: the central importance of establishing sensible, non-excessive, material goals; the desirability of attaining self-reliance; doing all this while still maintaining concern and protection from others; not losing sight of non-material aspects of life (Warr, 2007). The debate continues.

Supporting Lindsay Falvey's research and King Bhuipol's "Sufficiency Economy," the United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council submitted a report in December 2010 titled, "The Right to Food." Oliver De Schutter (2010) reports "states can and must achieve a reorientation of their agricultural systems modes towards modes of production that are highly productive, highly sustainable and that contribute to the progressive realization of the human right to adequate food" (p. 1). De Schutter not only advocated for reorienting our food systems but identifies agro ecology as a proven method of agricultural development showing "strong conceptual connections with the right to food" and "proven results for fast progress in various countries and environments" (2010, p.1). Moreover, De Schutter states that in addition to strengthening high variety and production yield, agro ecology contributes to broader economic development, an arguable root cause for food related poverty (2010, p.1). He claims that agro ecology can address the world's right to sustainable food sources but recognizes that the main challenge to this approach is the "scaling up" of these modes. De Schutter proposes alternative public policies including reinvesting in agricultural research and services, investing in social organization and partnerships, investment in agricultural research and extensions systems, women's empowerment, and the creation of an enabling macro-economic environment that would include connecting sustainable farms to fair markets (Warr, 2010).

The United Nations (2003) published a case study on Refugees living in Mae La Camp. "Dietary Assessment of Refugees Living in Camps: A Case Study of Mae La Camp, Thailand"



shows qualitative strength by surveying 182 households and 1,159 people total. The report, conducted by seven researchers, states, “The food basket provided by the TBBC is sufficient in short term situations, and it has been assumed that refugees living in camps for an extended period should be able to supplement the food basket to create a balanced diet for long-term sustenance” (Banjong et.al, 2003, p. 360). The results of the study are as follows:

*Although the refugees were able to procure non-ration foods by foraging, planting trees and vegetables, raising animals, and purchasing and exchanging ration foods for other items... the diet may be adequate for short-term subsistence, they do not suffice for long-term survival and optimal growth, especially for younger children (Banjong et. al, 2003, p. 360).*

Results of the case study were divided into three sections: household demographic and economic characteristics, food consumption and nutritional status. Household demographics reveal a total population of 48.9% male and 51.1% female between ages 14 and 60. The average household size was 6.4 persons with 86%. Researchers report that main food sources provided for, “86% of all nutrients consumed in the households, except for vitamin A (38.8%), vitamin C (2.1 %), and vitamin B2 (60.5%) and animal protein (65.4%)” (Banjong et.al, 2008, p. 362).

Nutritional findings report that in comparison to Thai children under 5, malnutrition among refugee children is much higher: 18.6 % of children underweight, 16% stunted and 5.9% wasted while adults were measured at normal nutritional status (Banjong et al, 2008, p. 362).

Researchers indicate that the high quantity of rice consumed with little other proteins, vegetables or fruits “makes it less likely that both children and adults would be able to consume adequate nutrients for optimal growth and health” (Banjong et al, 2008, p. 362).

TBBC's food basket were intended to be supplemented by foraging for various edible foods in the nearby surrounding forests, garden plots or purchasing food. However, refugees are not allowed to leave the camp premises to find food, there is no space to garden and low to no earning power of households (median annual household income reported at 500 baht or roughly \$150.00 USD) means there is no money to buy food. Researchers conclude, "while rations may be adequate for short-term subsistence, they do not suffice for long-term and optimal growth, especially the younger children" (Banjong et al, 2008, p. 366).

### **Thailand National Literature**

In a working paper by Isvilanonda S. and I. Bunyasiri (2009) entitled, "Food Security in Thailand: Status, Rural Poor Vulnerability, and Some Policy Options," the authors analyze agricultural development in Thailand over the last few decades. Isvilanonda and Bunyasiri discuss Thailand's food surplus at the macro level revealing food insecurity on the household level. Research suggests the impact of rising food prices on agricultural households depends on whether or not they are net buyers of food commodities whose prices have increased" (2009, p. iii). Data findings suggest that rural Thai rice farmers are the most severely affected by higher production costs, increasing input prices, reduction in net profits and low returns on operating costs. Thai rural farmers receive lower wages, which affect their ability to purchase food thus decreasing their nutritional and overall caloric intake. For remedy, they make the following policy proposals: providing opportunities for off-farm work, provisions of micro-lending schemes for small farmers, empowering farmers' capacity building based on sufficiency economy concepts, continued sponsoring of government training courses in sufficiency economy principles, farm productivity enhancement through agricultural research investment, improvement of village-pool water resources and on-farm water resource management and

investment. Sufficiency economy, a policy concept utilized in various parts of Thailand to enhance farmers' resiliency to shock, is defined as the ability to sufficiently provide for oneself through self-reliance by mobilizing social capital, local wisdom and natural resources, "On the production side, knowledge and skills of natural methods should be disseminated for providing alternative production choice to farmers. On the financial side, knowledge of basic farm accounting, cash flow analysis as well as risk management would be required" (Tontisirin and Bhattacharjee, 2000, p. 37).

Kraisid Tontisirin and Lalita Bhattacharjee (2000), authors of "Impact of Economic Crisis on Nutritional Status: Case Examples-Thailand" examined malnutrition as a consequence of poverty. Topics examined included the decline of poverty in Thailand over the past decade, community-based nutrition improvement programs, and consumer protection. Tontisirin and Bhattacharjee discuss various integrated activities targeted at areas with the highest poverty levels. In Thailand, these are primarily rural sectors in the North and Northeast. According to Tontisirin and Bhattacharjee, Thailand's approach of quasi-decentralization through the integration of social services at various levels (provincial, district, sub-district and villages) implemented by four distinct ministries (health, agriculture, education and interior) have alleviated food related poverty substantially. They state:

*The establishment of broad ranging, integrated food and nutrition programs as part of poverty reduction efforts has contributed to long-standing nutrition improvement. The existence of the 'social safety net' and well-established infrastructure supported by a strong peoples' participation, has substantially provided a buffer system in the country* (2000, p. 7).

## Local and Community Literature

The *Community Agriculture Nutrition Handbook* (CAN Handbook) is a practical users guide to local sustainable agriculture. It is a collaborative body of work primarily written by three main people: David Saw Wah, Jacob Thomson and Andrea Menefee, MPH RD (2007). Its design is unique, specifically crafted to aid Burmese audiences and translated into five different languages: English, Burmese, Karen, Pa'O, and Shan. David Saw Wah states, “While we have been living in refugee camps we have slowly been losing our heritage, our wisdom, and our ways. For our children, rice comes from a warehouse, not grown on our land by our own hands. (2007).

The CAN Handbook is divided into 8 “how-to” sections: soil, seeds, in the field, growing crops, fertilizers and pest control, plants, nutrition and resources. Complete with illustrations, refugees can create food security using available land and the natural world. The handbook also provides nutritional and medical advice on vitamins and minerals to alleviate the most common food related ailments in camps.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Literature Review

### Strengths:

1. Literature review presents a broad perspective of food security ideology in international, national and locally written texts
2. Literature review provides current discussions on food security development issues
3. Literature provides alternative food development perspectives and strategies
4. The focus on hill tribe and refugee communities increases awareness around historically marginalized people

### **Weaknesses:**

1. The literature reviews broad perspective is not a deepened analysis of food security issues
2. Broad perspective may generalize experiences across many diverse experiences
3. Broad perspectives may be confusing and overwhelming for those new to understanding food security and development
4. Obvious researcher bias demonstrated in attempts to “broaden” food security dialogue

### **Research Question**

The scope of this research is to understand food security as it exists in northern Thailand for hill tribe people and refugees at the household level. Food security is the ability for “all people at all times [to have] physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food for a healthy and active life” (TBBC, 2008, p.1). These growing populations need to be protected and recognized by the Thai government. However, a long-standing stalemate persists as the government refuses to register these communities to discourage living and settling in Thailand.

### **Research Question:**

Do existing food sources provide food security for non-Thai nationals?

### **Research Sub-Questions:**

1. How often are non-Thais able to access food sources?
2. Do these food sources meet consumer consumption needs at all times?
3. What factors have contributed to securing food sources?
4. What similarities or differences exist between Thai hill tribes and Burmese refugees when securing food sources?

## Purpose and Significance of Research Question

The purpose of my research is to compare and contrast the lived experiences of hill tribe and refugee communities when securing food sources. This study identifies overlapping themes commonly affecting these communities and advocates for legalized and formal protection by the Thai government.

## Research Design and Data Collection Methodology

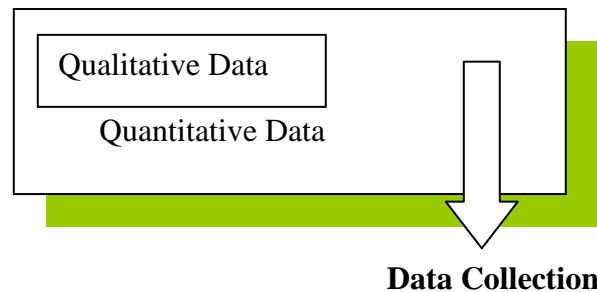
### Two-Tiered Research Design: Embedded + Triangulation

My research is an “embedded research design” model because of its strong qualitative leanings supported by secondary quantitative data. While my research does not demonstrate quantitative strength, research findings are strengthened by secondary quantitative data. John Creswell (2009), author of *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approach* explains the significance of an embedded research model as discussed below:

*(An embedded research design) is...identified by its use of one data collection phase, during which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously...a concurrent embedded approach has a primary method that guides the project and secondary database that provides a supporting role in the procedures. Given less priority, the secondary method (quantitative or qualitative) is embedded, or nested, within the predominant method (qualitative or quantitative) (p. 214).*

The embedded research design offers the researcher the opportunity to compare two different research questions at different levels of analysis. However, my research design does not follow suit in this way and investigates one inquiry question. The main focus of my research design is to understand the aforementioned research question and sub-questions, but does so with heavy

quantitative leanings and secondary qualitative sources to compensate for a small subject inquiry pool. According to Creswell, an illustration of an embedded design would look like this:



**Figure 3: Embedded Research Design**

The research design used surveys, focus groups and interviews to concurrently gather data. I had five one-on-one interviews with hill tribe community members, conducted two focus groups in Mae La refugee camp and collected thirteen surveys from local NGO workers living/working Thailand. All survey participants worked with Burmese refugees in various capacities. The survey, comprised of ten open-ended questions, was submitted three times via the Mae Sot mailer, an online weekly newspaper accessible to international workers along the Thai/Burma border, and forwarded to professional contacts.

### **One-on-One and Focus Group Interviews**

I had five one on one interviews. The first two interviews were conducted separately with COSA's Co-Directors to gain their individual perspectives of working with hill tribe communities. The third interview conducted was with one of the twelve current hill tribe chiefs in northern Thailand. The fourth interview was with the Section Leader of Mae La camp in direct communication with refugees living in these camps. The fifth interview was held with two staff members from Heifer International, a multi-national NGO working in northern Thailand with the Karen, Akha and Lisu hill tribe groups outside Chiang Mai. While the interview was intended to be focused on a specific staff member working directly with the aforementioned groups, the

interview became a conversation among three people as another Heifer staff member was present to translate. The interview became a group discussion though this was not initially intended. The difference between having a one-on-one interview and a group interview made a noticeable difference, as participants became more engaged in dialogue with one another. The session flowed more easily and became more about honest inquiry than about answering specific and designated questions prepared by the researcher.

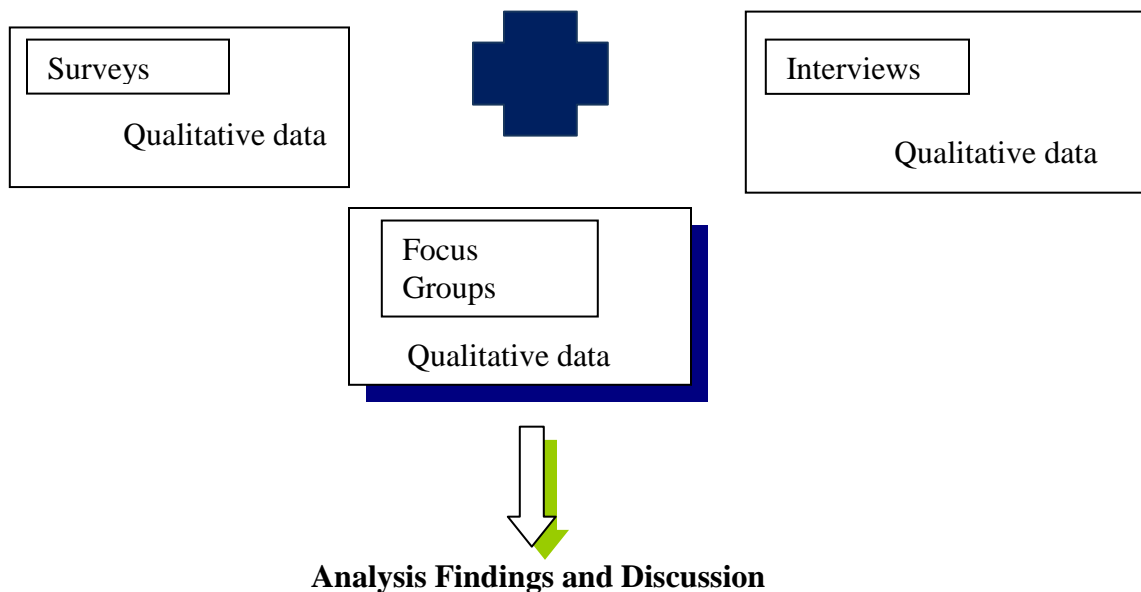
The first focus group interview was comprised of five female refugees from Mae La Camp selected by the camp section leader. The women varied in age, ethnicity, length of time in the refugee camps and family size. The second focus group was comprised of three employees from COSA: two Thai-nationals, born and raised in Thailand, and one long time Burmese migrant who did not identify his citizenship status.

All interviews were recorded on a hand-held recorder with the exception of one, as this individual was sharing highly sensitive information and refused to participate unless all recording instruments were put away. Instead, notes were taken to the best of my ability highlighting questions and documenting the main points of his answers. With the exception of one interview, all conversations were transcribed manually. Prior to interviewing, my questions and consent forms were translated into Thai and read aloud to ensure interviewees understood my purpose, research design, and focus highlighting their right to abstain from answering. While many participants could not read, translators read aloud and had interviewees sign and date the consent documents. Many could not write either and marked consent forms with an "X".

Once research was coded and collected from focus groups, interviews and surveys, data was analyzed to identify emergent themes. Emergent themes were compared with one another, or triangulated, to identify possible overlaps of experience among investigated communities.



Creswell states that a concurrent triangulation approach can produce substantiated and well validated data, “the researcher collects both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and then compares the two databases to determine if there is convergence, differences, or some combination” (2009, p. 213). Using triangulation to analyze data findings allowed me to extract differences, convergences and different combinations of convergences. The illustration for a triangulated research design is below:



**Figure 4: Triangulated Research Design**

The diagram illustrates the three research methods used in my inquiry. After triangulating data, three emergent themes were identified suggesting two overlapping experiences between hill tribe and refugee communities and one overlapping theme among hill tribe, Thai citizens and NGO workers.

### **Research Limitations**

The limitations inherent in my research design are listed below:

1. Small survey sample size
2. Language and cultural barriers

3. Researcher effect (participants withholding information because they do not know the researcher)
4. One interview was not recorded due to subject sensitivity and instead, was hand written. Much information could potentially have been lost due to manual recording. To mitigate the effects of this, I took notes and reviewed my notes with the translator to ensure accuracy of meaning
5. Lack of prior experience using mixed methods research analysis. My inexperience led to difficulty in balancing, comparing & contrasting research findings
6. Use of mixed-methodologies was time consuming and lengthy in the data collection process

## **Findings**

My findings are organized into three sections: surveys, one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

### **Surveys**

When analyzing surveys, there were five themes that emerged. First, findings revealed that food security is indicative on many other conditions: income, employment, and location of household. Specific factors that made food security challenging were the natural environment, access to forest, competing land usage and population density. Second, data revealed that lack of Thai citizenship and low land discrimination were the main challenges refugees and hill tribe faced and one of the biggest factors preventing food security. Third, findings showed drastically different challenges between hill tribe and refugees when securing food sources. In refugee camps, surveys reported there was not enough space to farm inhibiting small vegetable plots to supplement meager ration distributions. Rations distributed by TBBC are not enough to feed

families. One NGO worker reported, “Refugee challenges include diversifying their diet since the food ration is limited and does not include fruit and vegetables. Other challenges include sharing food with new arrivals who may not be registered or receive a food ration. Water shortages pose challenges for growing plants in camps” Lastly, NGO workers often noted some of the physical manifestations of malnutrition, “I do know that from going from the camps, malnutrition is evident. Children and adults are underweight and what food I do see children snacking on seems to be sugary 5 baht snacks they can afford from shops” (M. Diamond, personal communication, July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

### **Hill Tribe Focus Groups**

Three main themes were found when interviewing hill tribe group participants. First, hill tribe and refugees reported having interest in organic farming. Many grew up on farms growing sugarcane, tea leaves, rice and bamboo shoots to be sold or exchanged for other necessary household goods. Second, hill tribe participants report that they are unable to make a living from organic farming and need chemicals to compete in the market. Many farmers are unable to make a living for their families by organic farming because they do not have enough money to purchase chemicals and instead, have found work doing odd jobs for others. Third, chemical fertilizers have replaced cow manure as the main fertilizer used for crop production. Farmers mix chemicals with farm manure to alleviate the effects of chemicals in the soil and to save money (chemicals are reported to be expensive). One farmer reported he still tries to do organic farming but cannot because the seeds will not grow or pests destroy the leaves so that when it comes time to eat the produce, there is nothing left to eat.

## Refugee Focus Group

Refugee focus groups resulted in two main themes. First, refugees report that food rations are not enough to feed their families and second, there are no employment opportunities in camps, which suggest food insecurity. Refugees report that they are scared to leave the camps to find work and/or to forage for food for fear of deportation back to Burma.

With regards to the first theme (food rations), refugees report they often share food with neighbors when rations run out and replace borrowed food when they receive the next ration. In addition, rations have decreased in quantity because allotted food is not reaching households. Some refugees speculate that Thai guards and other camp leaders are stealing rations and the majority of the people are given less rations to compensate for this. While refugees never receive fresh vegetables or fruit, camp leaders are seen to be eating fresh vegetables 2-3 times a month. This implies ration stealing and/or selling occurring from the top of the distribution chain.

## Interviews

Interviews revealed three main themes. First, Organic farming does not produce enough reliable yields to securely feed oneself or one's family. Challenges to successful organic farming include pest infestations, bad seed varieties from China, no more youth to aide in farming duties and bad soil conditions. Second, government and businesses encourage chemical usage to maintain monopoly on rice exports. Increased roadside ads and commercials promote various chemical fertilizers claiming to increase crop yields. Small scale farmers now grow food for larger corporations and because there are no other employment options. Cash crops refer to crops being grown for large commercial distribution instead of for household family consumption. Interview participants report increased death rates and birth defects in hill tribe communities as many indigenous people have had up to three kinds of chemicals traced in their bodies.

### **Cross-Cutting Themes Between Burmese Refugees and Hill Tribe Communities**

1. Lack of other gainful employment and lowland/police discrimination prevents access to gainful employment. This is the most reoccurring reason for food insecurity.
2. Inability to access and apply for Thai Citizenship.

### **Cross-Cutting Theme Across Hill Tribe, Thai and NGO Workers**

1. Government and big businesses are increasing advertisements promoting pesticides usage to increase production and revenue. Increased farm production in addition to chemical usage is destroying the land.

## **Discussion**

I will be focusing on three cross cutting themes:

- 1) Employment
- 2) Lack of access to Thai citizenship
- 3) Usage of chemical fertilizers

## **Employment**

Employment is a recurring theme affecting the ability to secure food. While hill tribe and refugee populations are unregistered—a necessity for formalized employment in Thailand--many find work in informal sectors where they are legally unprotected and vulnerable to employment related abuses (i.e., unfair wages, longer work hours, and/or unsafe working conditions). To understand employment availability for non-Thai nationals, one must first examine Thailand's national employment rates and compare/contrast employment opportunities available for Thais and non-Thais.

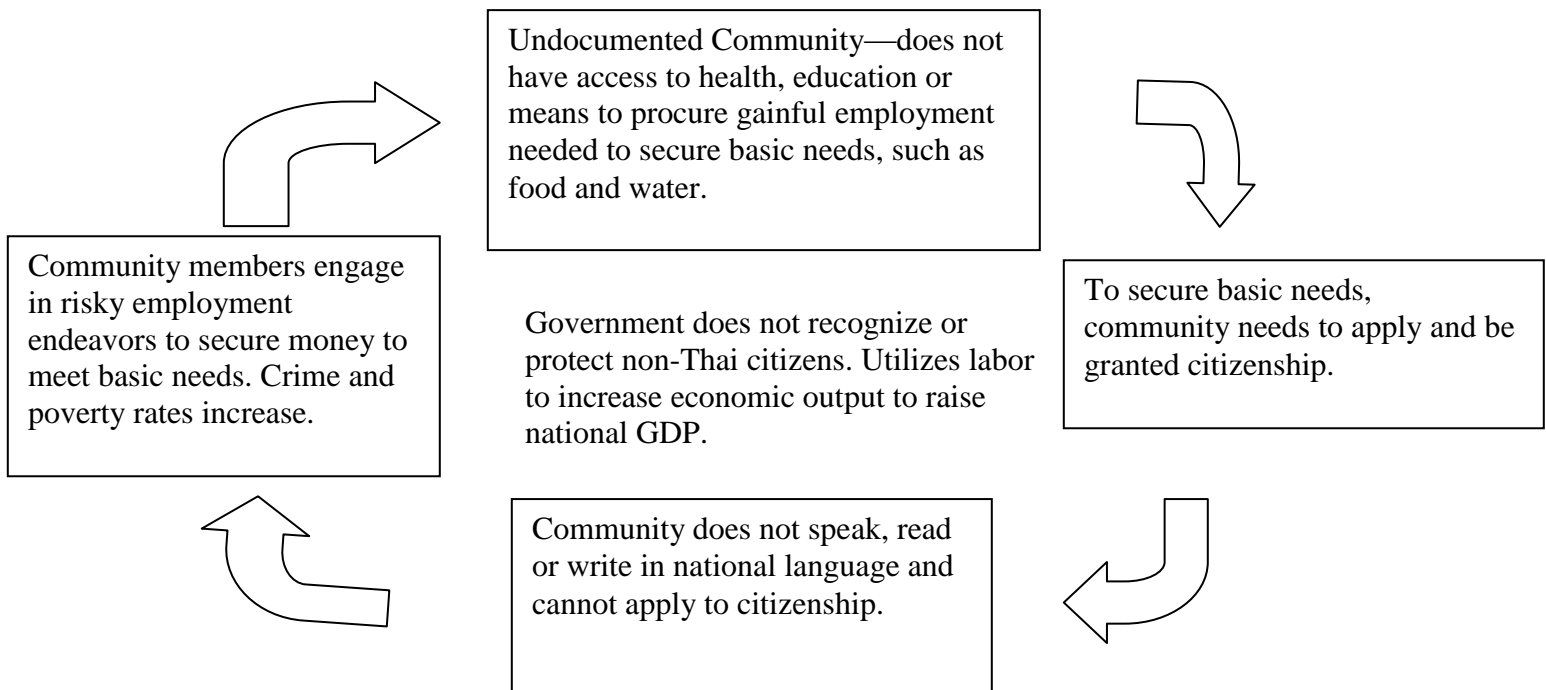


Source: Trading.Economics.com; Bank of Thailand  
**Figure 5: Thailand Unemployment Rate**

According to this graph, the Thai unemployment rate has decreased steadily since July 2009 suggesting consistent economic growth, “When the economy is growing, both unemployment rates and the average duration of unemployment decline” (Schiller, 2010). While economic growth does not necessarily indicate individual well being, it suggests overall positive social trends: decrease in family stress and increased in food expenditures, medical care, children and family as well as uninterrupted education. According to the graph above, Thailand’s unemployment rate is below the frictional unemployment rate, or the time spent between finding jobs. Schiller states, “most economists agree...that friction alone is responsible for an unemployment rate of 2 to 3 percent. Accordingly, our definition of “full employment” should allow for at least this much unemployment” (2010, p. 120). According to this graph, Thailand has experienced increased economic growth due to the decrease of the frictional employment rate. While this chart reflects increased employment opportunities for Thai citizens, this cannot be assumed for all non-Thai citizens, “minority workers also experience above-average unemployment” (Schiller, 2010, p. 115).

The Center for the Coordination of Non-governmental Tribal Development Organization (CONTO) and World Concern Thailand reported an estimated 991,122 hill tribe people living in Thailand in 1999. Of this number, “40% of total tribal people don’t have Thai citizenship. They

are also regarded as second-class population of the Thai society, racism and discrimination are also frequently happening in different forms” (Life Development Center, Retrieved March, 7 2011, www.idcl.org). CONTO and World Concern Thailand report that in order to gain Thai citizenship, hill tribe must not only be able to speak Thai (hill tribes speak different dialects), but be proficiently literate in order to follow application guidelines. The inability to apply due to language and illiteracy results in a negative feedback loop:



**Figure 6: Non-Thai National Negative Feedback Loop**

Group	Total Village	Total Household	Total Population	% of education
Karen tribe	2,630-2,960	70,890-80,000	476,570-510,000	43-45%
Hmong tribe	260-290	15,700-15,810	126,300-128,100	24-26%
Mien tribe	195-240	9,540-11790	48,400-58,750	6-7%
AKha tribe	270-335	9,800-13,050	56,600-65,250	10-11%
Lahu tribe	446-531	15,400-21,200	85,845-127,200	11-12%
Lisu tribe	161-236	5,650-8260	35,600-42,000	5-6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,962-4,592</b>	<b>126,980-150,110</b>	<b>829,315-931,300</b>	

Source: Life Development Center, <http://www.ldcl.org>

**Figure 7: Literacy Rates Among Thai Hill Tribe**

Low literacy rates combined with the hardship in obtaining citizenship has led to informal employment in risky sectors such as the sex industry, selling of cultural artifacts, commercial farming, child and drug trafficking, or in sweat shops. While the majority of hill tribe people desire full citizenship to access jobs, healthcare and education, there are others wary of outside influence. According to Arguettant (1993), “On the other side of the coin, a widespread assertion among hill tribe is that ‘change’ is not all good.’ Among the hill tribe people of Thailand, the Akha, Lahu and Lisu are particularly inclined to view all outside influence with suspicion; for example, “the road is a big snake climbing up the hill to kill us” (p. 51).

With regards to refugees, there is little recorded census information except in refugee camps lining the western Thai border. In June 2006, 1,333, 703 foreign [Burmese] workers were registered as employed in textiles, footwear, fishery products, rice, rubber—in short, associated with cheap export products by competitors who utilize cheap available labor to maintain international competitiveness (Bree, 2010, p. 41). It is calculated that “if migrants are as productive as Thai workers in each sector, their total contribution to output would be around US \$11 billion, or 6.2 percent of Thailand’s GDP” (Bree, 2010, p. 41). While employment opportunities exist in the informal sector, wages remain significantly lower than wages earned in the formal sector.

### **Cultural, Gender and Educational Intersections with Employment**

In Thailand, the patriarchal system of men as head of the household remains an entrenched cultural norm giving men the right to unilaterally make decisions for the entire family. Ironically, the care-taking of the family falls exclusively on women though little to no decision making ability is granted. The need to secure food for the family is done with or without the support of the (male) head of the household with wages often being unevenly distributed in



the home. However, non-Thai women—in comparison to non-Thai women-- have less educational opportunities suggesting greater difficulty accessing employment and securing food sources.

Women—in particular mothers—emerged from this research as the primary determinants of overall family wellness. Food security for the entire family was dependent on the mother's ability to secure income to procure basic needs for the family, “The ‘invisible’ nature of women's contributions further reinforces the social perception that they are ‘dependents’ rather than ‘producers.’ Indeed, from individual men to massive bureaucracies, the tendency at every level of society seems to be to play down the importance of female contributions to family income” (Jacobson, 1992, p. 17).

This cultural phenomenon manifested itself when I first arrived at Burmese refugee camps to engage in group interviews. Upon arrival at the camps, I walked into a room full of five women. When I asked the camp leader (who arranged the focus group) why I was interviewing just women, he asked me, “You want to know about food, right?” I responded, “Yes.” He replied, “Then you ask women, they are in charge of cooking and feeding the family. Men know nothing of this—they are the first ones served and the first to leave the table, whatever food is leftover from the men and children the women eat” (M.Diamond, personal communication, August 17, 2010).

Within Thai hill tribe communities, it is no secret that women have less decision making ability than men. As stated by a hill tribe interviewee, women are regarded as “second class citizens” (M. Diamond, personal communication, June 22, 2010). Cultural gender norms require young girls to stay home to take care of the family while their brothers are sent to school or encouraged to travel. To increase earning power to fulfill their cultural role, women participation

in informal labor sectors has increased as mens share of income towards family needs has decreased. An estimated 28.7% of women are self-employed and work in the female non-agricultural labour force contributing between 35-40 per cent of the work and income generated in the informal sector (Cameron et al, 2001, p. 10). According to the first *National Statistic Office Homework Survey* done in 1999, informal sectors are “diverse activities ranging from self-employed activities such as dressmaking, street vending, domestic service workers and home based, piece rate work” (National Statistics Office, 2000).

### **Percentage of Self Employed in Female Non-Agricultural Labour Force**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>
Developed	10.4	9.7	11.1
Africa	38.1	59.3	62.8
Latin America	28.6	29.2	32.1
Asia	27.9	26.7	28.7
World	24.0	28.4	27.6

Source: Beneria,L. (2001). *Changing Employment Patterns and the Informalization of Jobs: General Trends and Gender Dimensions*. International Labour Office, Geneva Switzerland.

**Figure 8: Self Employment in the Female Non-Agricultural Labor Force**

Women’s incomes are disproportionately used towards familial needs while men’s income are utilized for personal interests outside the family. “Women are the main breadwinners in a large share of families throughout the Third World. They contribute proportionally more cash income to family welfare than do men, holding back less for personal consumption” (United Nations, 1995). Assuming that women’s wages are disproportionately returned towards family needs, a saturated informal sector suggests lowered returns towards the household and less ability to secure food sources at all times.

## Chemical Pesticide Usage, Women and Family Food Security

Chemical pesticide usage was a cross cutting theme arising among only hill tribe, Thai nationals and NGO workers interviewed. Chemical pesticide usage did not come up among Burmese refugees.

The shift from small-scale farms (utilized to feed the family) to a transnational industry based on cash crops has caused the acidification of soil due to overuse and chemicals. Organic farming, used by generations of native residents before cash crops, is no longer a viable means of feeding the household unit. One non-Thai farmer stated:

*[He] doesn't do that anymore because his family has such a massive land. Just doesn't work and he can't make living from doing that. The dirt that is being used by his family is very poor because it has been ruined by chemicals over the years. So now they have to use the chemical on top of that to activate more growing. It's been a cycle and if they don't use it, they can't grow and the land will be wasted. Whatever successful or not, if they don't use chemicals, they can't sell crops. The chemical prices are going up every year (M. Diamond, personal communication, May 20, 2011).*

A Thai NGO worker reports on the increased signage promoting the increase of chemical usage in remote farm areas:

*I am not a farmer by any means. The people in the Northern regions have had up to three kinds of chemicals traced in their bodies, which means that they have been exposed or consumed by these chemicals by producing locally grown produce. And in my personal opinion, why doesn't the Thai government encourage people to grow organically because of the monopoly of chemical fertilizers? If you drive along the hill tribe and hillsides,*

*along there, you can see lots of signage: a sign or poster that has been put there by the chemical companies* (M. Diamond, personal communication, May 20, 2011).

Farmers and NGO workers are acutely aware of the influence of big businesses on agriculture. A Heifer International employee, a local NGO working to increase livestock ownership through community engagement, reports on the negative influence of national policy on food security:

*[National Policy is a big part of food security] but most of the people in the Parliament are businessmen and are major food producers in Thailand, like owning 7-11. They are trying to encourage cash crops work in Parliament, still difficult because these people are trying to change policies to reflect their business ventures* (M. Diamond, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

The effects of increased pesticide usage has been damaging to women. In particular, pesticide inhaling and increased consumption affects women's health leading to a number of reproductive disruptions, increases in respiratory illnesses, birth defects, and higher incidences of cancer. Studies done in four Asian countries, whose GDP is buoyed by agricultural exports show that 9.4% of farm workers have been *identified* as affected by chemical pesticides; the number of those who suffer from pesticide exposure but *have not* been identified is unknown but can be assumed to be a significant number. This study was completed in 1987 (at the beginning of the economic boom) in Thailand during a time when big business ventures and investments first changed from conservative to exuberant; since then, rising GDP has resulted in increased exports of rice, cassava, and tea. The increase of commercial food production suggests parallel increases in chemical pesticide usage.

Currently, Thailand's most prosperous export (rice) has nearly monopolized global productions. An NGO worker reflects, "You need to remember, that we (Thai's) used to do rice harvests one a year, now we do it like three times a year, every three months. To accelerate rice growing, we have to use chemicals. For example in India, they are suffering right now because

of fertilizer and the depleted nutrients from the soil. You can use chemicals for 4-6 years and then the soil is completely depleted” (M.Diamond, personal communication, May 20, 2011). According to data, non-Thai’s working in cash crop farming do not engage in this sector by choice but by necessity. When I asked a hill tribe participant if this is what he always saw himself doing as a child, he replied, “What choice did I have?” (M. Diamond, personal communication, June 22, 2010).

## **Obtaining Thai Citizenship**

Joseph Aguezzant (1996) explores current “development” in the highlands. In his journal, “Impact of Population Registration on Hill Tribe Development in Thailand,” Aguezzant reports that the “integration of upland people into lowland, mainstream society is of critical importance to development. Recognition as Thai citizens has been stressed by the hill tribe people themselves. Almost all (90%) of them declare that holding Thai citizenship is first on their list of priorities for it provides access to land rights, education and professions only open to Thai nationals” (1996, p. 47).

### **A. Village Registration**

To be registered in the Village Directory of the Department of Local Administration (DOLA), there must first be a village number, name and committee (villages that have organized this are now called “core” villages). Once a village is registered, each household must now register for a household card (tho ro 13 or tho ro 14) through the village registration application process.

## B. Household Registration

The National Statistical Office (NSO) uses six criteria to classify Hill Tribe registration:

- (a) registered with non-Thai nationality,*
- (b) registered with Thai nationality,*
- (c) registered with another government agency,*
- (d) Thai nationality but not registered,*
- (e) other, i.e. non-registered, non-Thai nationality, and*
- (f) unknown. (Arguettant, 1992, p. 57).*

Data on each household card must include: address of the household, names and members and their dates of birth, information on citizenship, date of moving into the household, place moved from and population identification number. With completed information and approval from the governor, a Household Registration Form can be issued to each household member. Holding the form for 14 days is a condition of eligibility for Thai citizenship.

## C. Individual Registration

To be eligible to be a Thai citizen, a hill tribe individual must:

- (a) be under the supervision of a governmental office such as the Public Welfare Department, Border Patrol Police, Internal Security Department or the Army, or*
- (b) have been verified and registered during the period 1969-1970, or*
- (c) have been registered on a house registration certificate by the ID Project approved by the Cabinet on 20 July 1982, or*
- (d) likewise have been registered during the period March-August 1985 by one of the projects approved by the Cabinet on 24 April 1984, or*

*(e) have been eligible during the period 1985-1988 for the Survey of the Hill Tribe People in Thailand, approved by the Cabinet on 24 April 1984, or*

*(f) during the period 1990-1991, have been registered and issued an ID card for highlanders by the project approved on 5 June 1990 (Arguettant,1992, p. 57).*

After meeting the registry criteria, an applicant can be granted citizenship if he/she:

*(a) was born in Thailand and reached the age of maturity, or is legally married,*

*(b) is occupying a permanent residence with his name on a household registration certificate, or has maintained his or her status regarding one item of evidence in Rule 5 for more than five years in the same district, or if having moved to a new permanent residence because of marriage but legally informed the authorities of the move and the total duration of stay at both places is not less than five years, or*

*(c) earning a living honestly and is harmless to society and the nation, and*

*(d) not growing any narcotic plants, or has given up such a practice. (Arguettant,1992, p.58).*

## **Conclusion**

Food insecurity among hill tribe and refugee populations in northern Thailand does not cause itself; it is created by the same structural and behavioral problems that also cause poverty and powerlessness among these communities: low levels of education and literacy rates, inability to access Thai citizenship, lack of secure employment, gender/ethnic discrimination and conflicting ideologies between King Buihol and Parliament. Women and children are most affected by food insecurity and will continue to be if education and job opportunities do not become more readily accessible. In the larger picture, society will be negatively impacted as women, primarily responsible for the family unit, continue to experience vocational and

educational disparity in comparison to men. To increase non-Thai ability to secure food sources, several recommendations have been made in accordance with results generated from this report.

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations are organized in two separate but interrelated categories: Employment and Obtaining Thai Citizenship.

### **Employment:**

1. Increase job opportunities available to hill tribe and refugee communities
2. Increase female participation in the work force
3. Increase access to educational services and vocational training programs
4. Increase English/Thai language abilities through affordable education and outreach programs

### **Obtaining Thai Citizenship:**

1. Create public programs to assist during citizenship application process
2. Improve national census to accurately identify and register non-Thai communities
3. Nationally recognize that Burma's civil war has no end in sight; provide third country relocation services in refugee camps immediately or begin Thai registration process to become national citizens.



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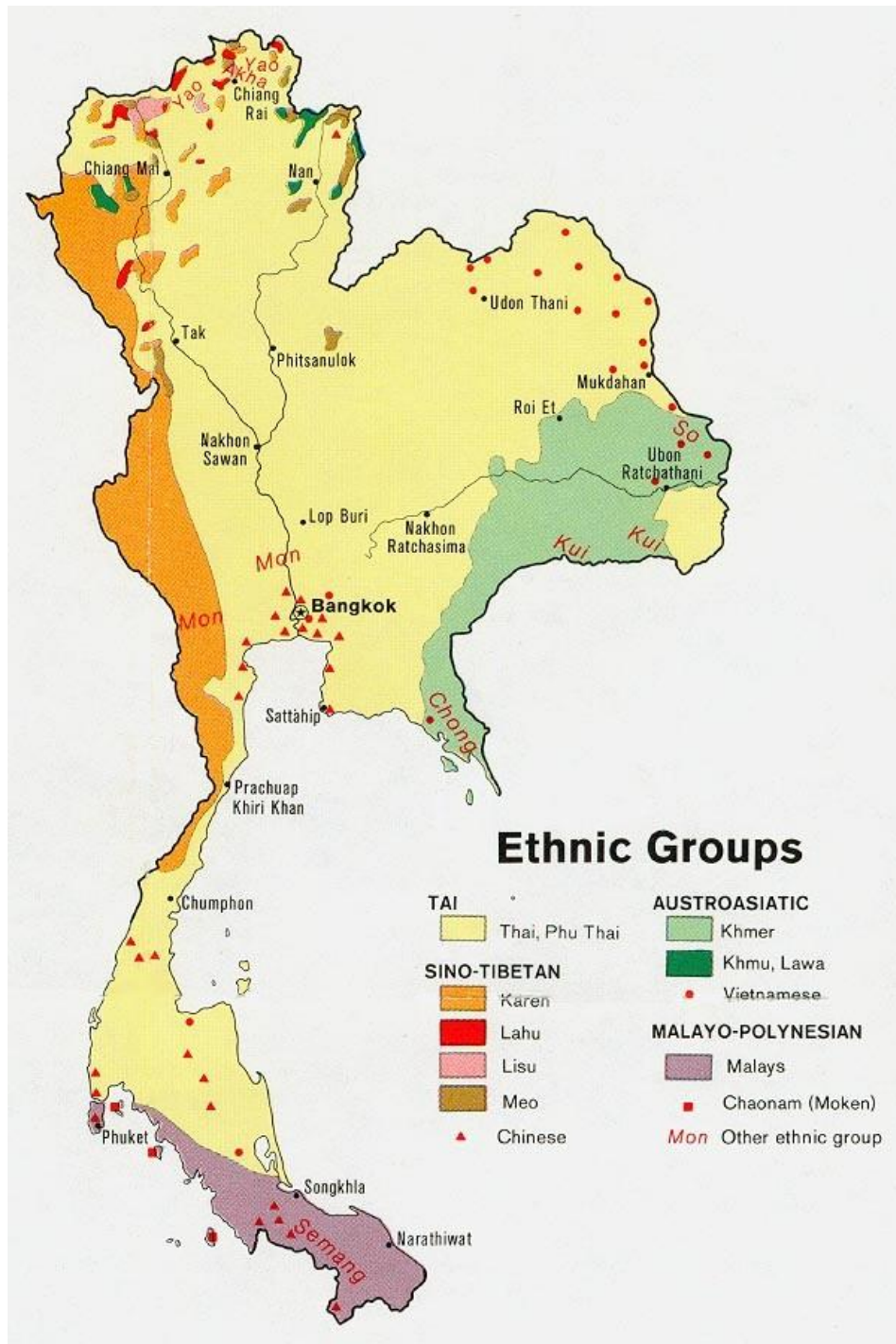
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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Thai Hill Tribe Ethnic Groups

[http://www.onlychaam.com/img\\_pages/thailand\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_map2.jpg](http://www.onlychaam.com/img_pages/thailand_ethnic_groups_map2.jpg)



## Appendix B: Distribution of Hill Tribe Ethnic Groups by Villages and Household

	<b>Karen</b>	<b>Hmong</b>	<b>Lahu</b>	<b>Lisu</b>	<b>Yao</b>	<b>Akha</b>	<b>Lua</b>	<b>H'tin</b>	<b>Khamu</b>	<b>Total</b>
Villages	2,132	243	421	135	173	258	53	148	32	3,595
Households	60,385	16,146	13,307	4,802	5,525	8,050	2,923	6,090	1,988	119,216
Total persons	32,190	12,421	73,252	27,899	40,371	48,468	15,711	32,755	10,153	694,720

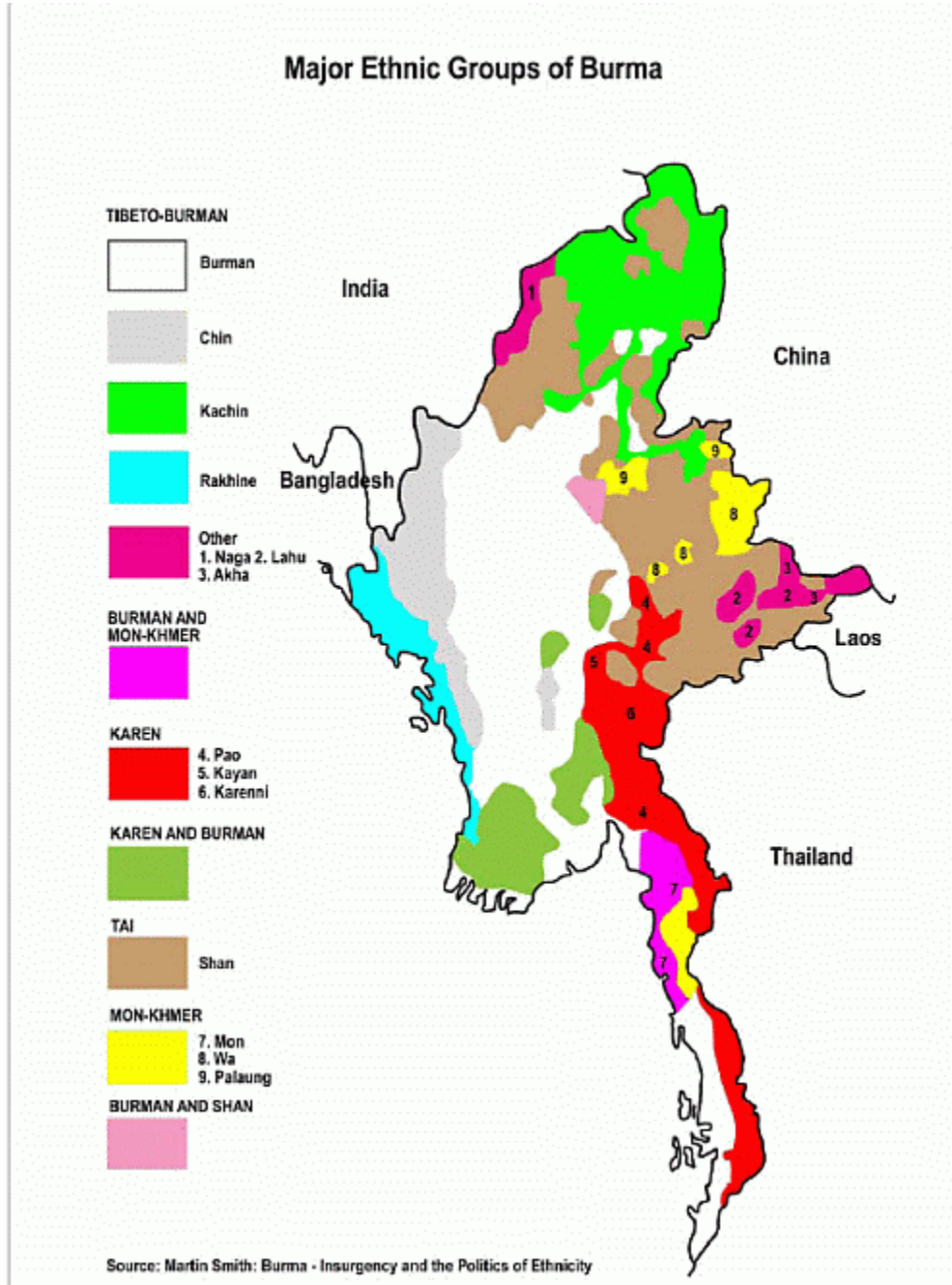
**Table 1: Distribution of hilltribe ethnic groups by villages and household**

*Source:* TRI (1995). Service and Publicity Section, Chiang Mai University.

Arguettant, J. (1996). Impact of Population Registration on hill tribe Development in Thailand. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (1996), pp. 47-72

## Appendix C. Map of Ethnic Boundaries in Burma

[http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2142/2181797684\\_a5e082aae2\\_o.gif](http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2142/2181797684_a5e082aae2_o.gif)



## **Appendix D: Interview Questions**

1. Could you please give your name and where you are originally from? How long have you lived in Thailand?
2. Could you please talk about how you earn a living and what your greatest source of income is?
3. What is your experience, either in Thailand or where you are from, with growing your own food?
4. What is your involvement currently growing your own food in Thailand? If you do not grow your own food, where do you get your food from?
5. If you do not grow your own food, why not?

*Or*

Why do you choose to grow your own food?

6. Are your food sources consistent (meaning, are you able to meet all your dietary, cultural and financial needs from these sources)?
7. Why do you choose to get your food from these sources?
8. What are the food staples in your diet?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share either about your food sources and/or growing your own food?



## **Appendix E: Survey Questions for Burmese Refugee NGO Workers**

1. In what capacity do you work, volunteer and/or interact with non-Thai ethnic groups? If you work or volunteer with an organization, please name the organization.
2. What are/were your roles and responsibilities?
3. What does “food security” mean to you and why? What has led you to believe this?
4. In your experience, what foods do non-Thai’s eat and/or cook most frequently with?
5. In as much detail as possible, please describe the food sources available to non-Thai citizens. How often are non-Thai citizens able to get food from these sources?
6. As far as you know, how so these food sources address the needs of non-Thai’s? What has led you to believe this to be true?
7. As far as you know, do these sources provide a diverse range of fresh vegetables, fruits, grains and spices? If yes, what foods are available and how often?
8. In your experience, what challenges have been presented to non-Thai citizens when acquiring and securing food?
9. In your experience, what successes have been presented to non-Thai citizens when acquiring and securing food sources?
10. How does availability/freshness/diversity of food and food sources for non-Thai’s compare with yours?
11. Where do you regularly get food from and do these sources fulfill your needs?
12. How do these food sources address your needs?
13. Do these sources provide a diverse, consistent range of fresh vegetables, fruits, grains, etc.?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about non-Thai citizens and their ability secure food through available food sources?