CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT AND "TRADE-OFFS":
THE APPARENT CONSEQUENCES FOR HUMAN
RIGHTS CONCERNS IN THAILAND

In *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*, Donnelly touches on a number of experiments in economic development in various countries in looking at various degrees of needs and equality trade-offs. He argues that much repression is undoubtedly a function for a particular development strategy and that the *familiar general claim that development requires repression is at best grossly misleading* (Donnelly, 1991: 201).

Dr. Suchit Bunbongkarn writes in his book State of the Nation: Thailand that the 1992 - 1996 years saw the emergence of a bourgeois democracy but that the economic development in these years generated pluralism in Thai society. This diversification did not, however, produce strong civic or civil society organizations to counter big business groups. He writes that this pattern has been a hindrance to further liberalization and development. He notes that tension and conflict were part of everyday life as Thailand underwent continued transformation. However, the unbalanced development and widening gap between the urban and rural areas in income and resource distribution, as well as in political culture and attitude, continued to be a serious problem and that the rural and urban disadvantaged were and would continue to become more vocal. The growing imbalance

has seen no improvement under the next 5-year plan, supposed to focus on "human development".

According to Dr. Bunbongkarn, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) also acknowledged that under the 7th economic and social development plan (1992 - 1996), the gap between the rich and poor remained serious. He points out that the quality of life or Human Development Index ranked 54th out of 173 in 1994, much better than 4 years earlier, but that the lot of the urban and rural poor had not seen much improvement. A major theme of the 8th Economic and Social Development Plan is "human development", but the real consequences for the less empowered segments of Thai society have garnered numerous unflattering and derogatory comments.

While a "weak" equality trade-off may have been advocated in the case of Thailand if the long-term *resulting distribution satisfies some principle of equity* (Donnelly, 1991: 165), the author believes that subsequent government reforms, particularly of the tax system, would be instrumental in expanding equality. But this does not seem to be taking such a direction in the case of Thailand. It would appear that Thailand still has a choice to make about the ultimate goals of its development.

If Thailand wishes to rectify its structural problems such as income disparity (which does not seem to be a temporary or self-correcting problem), it may be better off choosing "weak" needs and equality trade-offs under a development model that combines semi-industrialization and the enhancement of value-added agricultural products. If Thailand does not

decide how far it wants to proceed on the road to industrialization, then it may be impossible to rectify the economy's structural problems because, rather than being temporary and self-correcting, they will continue to become systematically endemic.

Under these circumstances, one would imagine that socio-economic and political conditions that would aggravate inequality, nurturing an environment for more pervasive human rights abuses, such as the modern-day slave trade going on even in 1999, as seen from Chapter 1, not to mention the weakening of traditional values, community systems and institutions. In short, with development imperatives having generally been undertaken for *contingent political choices* (Donnelly, 1991: 166), a more holistic approach, combining traditional and modern strengths, rather than blindly following a model of full industrialization with all it concomitant down-sides, may require fewer needs and equality trade-offs, perhaps making development goals less difficult or painful to attain if the objectives are not so different from the traditional strengths of the economy with which people may be more familiar and consequently feel more at ease.

Ideally, the introduction of new methods, adaptable technology and know-how, implemented with discretion and forethought may bring about *more successful ways of dealing with the existing traditional environment* (Jacobs, 1971: 9), but if the past is a timeless continuum, and if modernity and development are referred to as one and the same at pretty much all levels of Thai society (Kreingkraipetch & Smith, 1992: paraphrase), and if the Buddhist, Animist, and Brahminic values are at little variance to the beliefs and outlooks of the Thai today, *the supernatural beliefs....reflect*

43

those of modern Thailand (Cadet, 1982: 24), whereby time, one's life and one's world view, is shorter and transitory, whereby *future perspectives are rather immediate and actions are designed accordingly* (Mulder, 1994: 111), then, *the future is not knowable and so the best that can be done is to create a short time order facing the contingencies of the present* (Mulder, 1994: 112).

Furthermore, if keeping abreast with so-called "development" is just a matter of *integrating oneself into its requirements* (Mulder, 1994: 112), combined with the karmic perspective, *it is not really possible to combine one's lot to immediate, much less medium-range planning...leading to attitudes of resignation in the present, while nevertheless hoping for better circumstances in the distant future* (Mulder, 1994: 113).

Given the institutionalization of hierarchy in terms of socio-economic status and the concomitant religious notions which also *influence activities in non-religious contexts* (Podhisita, 1985: 25), combined with Thailand's integration into the global money economy, development has become *an open-ended commitment to change, no matter what the consequences might be for existing goals and ways of doing things* (Mulder, 1994: 123). In this sense, "development" is adopted on a contingency basis such that, *life becomes evaluated in its present dimensions only, and in an ad hoc fashion....the responses are presentational and formal and the measures taken are characteristically short-term* (Mulder, 1994: 123).

Given that conventional strategies for development will be implemented from top down, not from the grass-roots level, based on the

merit-power, wealth, professional rank, age, birth, etc., with Thai commodities (including women) at the mercy of international fluctuations, "cash" became the physical manifestation of "development" for Thailand to integrate itself into the international economy and for its people to integrate themselves into the requirements of a modern lifestyle. If this is the case, one focal question may be about the validity of the national development strategy which glorifies the stock market and consumerism while desensitizing awareness about burgeoning social issues.

In a hierarchical society steeped in religious and socio-cultural notions and practices from the past, for the people to be happy and content within a vertical system of relatively fixed hierarchy, and for the people to behave and interact in a civil and friendly manner despite, and/or as a consequence of different status, a kind of *respect among non-equals* (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996: 38), then the future maintenance of "happiness", "contentment" and "security", if the three are to be associated with how people evaluate the quality of their existences, may depend on the promotion of more mindful national development strategies which do not blindly follow Western strategies of development with their *baggage of Western-spawned sociology* (Jacobs, 1971: 11), development which encompasses a more holistic approach to *contribute to the preservation of old characteristics as well as foster the acquisition of new ones* (Charoenlert, 1996: 4), leading to greater prosperity at all levels of Thai society.

On the current development track toward full industrialization whereby *the consequence of growth has already brought about increasing polarization of Thai society* (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1996: 32), injustice,

discontent and unhappiness associated with poverty, unplanned urbanization, destruction of the environment, and so forth, have become symptoms of structural phenomena linked with the so-called "development" of Thailand.

In an increasingly inequitable society, aggravated by the Western model of industrialization and integration into the world money economy where control is placed in outside hands, even it people are resigned to accept their status, they still expect to be treated with kindness and compassion. One wonders how the symbiotic relationship of goodness and reciprocity will be as effective in the future, considering the current structural problems which appear to be causing continued polarization within society.

If hierarchy qualified by reciprocity are historically-particular factors which realized contented social relations within Thai society in the past, then perhaps Donnelly is valid in writing that such traditional relations may not be adequate to meet the complexities of modern society in terms of the potential impediments to human happiness. By the same token, it also seems likely that we are coming up with the wrong answers because the wrong aspects of development are being questioned. That is to say, because of the goal-oriented, rather than process-oriented, nature of development paths in Thailand, in many cases, the ends are justifying the means, and those means cannot necessarily be said to be beneficial to the majority.

Whether in a hierarchical society, development which respects people, development which humanizes rather than dehumanizes, depends on *qualitative rather than quantitative change* (Gohlert, 1991: 171). For these

reasons (and more), it would seem that the greatest threat to happiness, contentment and security in Thai society, opening up the potential for gross human rights violations could be a kind of "ideological confusion" whereby the mode of development continues to force irreconcilable trade-offs, fortifying the structurally-oppressive forces that be.