

FIRST DRAFT
15 June 1995

Commissioned paper on:

"The potential value and challenges in mobilizing regional network linkages among indigenous minorities, drawing on the experience on one such research network in Southeast Asia to investigate the potential for building new and perhaps more effective operational linkages among similar groups in the future"

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Presentation

This contribution to the ongoing network evaluation process at IDRC is primarily based on the observation of one specific network, "Regional Development and Indigenous Minorities in Southeast Asia" (88-0124), hereafter called "RDIMSEA" network. Initially considered a very promising project by program officers, one that would usefully link together several regional Centres researching on indigenous minorities in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, the outcome, though, has been disappointing. As a network, long term results are less than tangible and the project has been terminated in a state of relative confusion. Organisational problems, lack of research and intervention principles shared by all components, difference in size and strength among components, disengagement by some leaders during the course of activities, all are plausible but, yet, incomplete explanations of the failure. Is the nature of each component to be questioned? How really representative of the local minorities were they? What type of minority were these? Is it rather their communication and their relationship with each other that was a source of dispute? Or has their relationship with the donor been a significant factor? The first task of this proposal, therefore, is to search and identify the weak points of the endeavour.

To contribute to the ongoing evaluation process in the Centre and to be in a position to provide guidelines to donors and members of networks for the future, it is proposed to extract from the analysis of this case some principles which, perhaps, could be profitably generalised

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to other cases. Such an inductive methodology has evident limits, and the discussion will not try to encompass the full range of the problematic or draw positive conclusions. It will chiefly point to useful analogies.

How could repeating this "failure" be avoided in the future? This leads to the task of investigating the potential for building new operational linkages between components of a network to be. The needs for networking among Southeast Asian research Centres working with indigenous minorities still exist and are still manifest while left largely unanswered. Is there a possibility for rebuilding an effective network within the same environment and with the same type of members and tasks without falling into the same traps? What are the potential members' requests for participating in a more promising project, and what could be the donors' requirements to finance them? In the second section, a sketch for a preliminary framework taking these questions into account will be drawn.

A social anthropologist, the author favours an organic perspective. In terms of method, he went through the relevant IDRC files, interviewed program officers in Ottawa, talked with the network coordinator, and met with some of the participants in order to gather their analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the process they once participated in. Meetings were also held with new potential local participants in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam to investigate the possibility of creating a new network on indigenous minorities in the region, one that could take into account the conclusions and suggestions from the prior analysis as well as those from the evaluation process in general.

The author is an external observer who came only lately in touch with the network under scrutiny here. He has not witnessed the network's activities in the field as they occurred and therefore, his inquiry is by no means to be considered exhaustive and will probably reflect its author's insufficiencies. His hope is that despite the flaws and the possibly missing information, the overall analysis will be basically correct and accurate.

I- EVALUATION OF THE NETWORK

I-1 Project summary

IDRC network "Regional Development and Indigenous Minorities in Southeast Asia" was initially funded for 24 months. Funding was officially approved on 20 October 1988, the project completion date was set for mid 1991 and the project termination date was mid 1992. There were at the outset an interest for eventually renew the funding for a second term. At the mid term workshop in February 1991, a new final completion date was set to 28 February 1992. In April 1992, an extension without additional funding for the entire network was granted to allow each component the necessary time to prepare their respective reports for the final workshop scheduled for July 1992. New completion date was then set for 31 August 1992, and new termination date for 31 March 1993. Finally, the file in Ottawa, although incomplete and missing some of the financial and activities reports, was nonetheless officially closed on 12 December 1994.

RDIMSEA was an externally mobilized network. It grouped 5 components among which two were of the NGO type (Chiang Mai and Sabah), one was a mixed NGO-academic team (Baguio), one was strictly academic (Bangkok), the coordinating office being also located within academic context at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Project summary abstract by E.A.Pye, program officer in ASRO, reads as follows:

"This project will study the impact of regional development programs on indigenous minorities in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. Regional development is used in Southeast Asia to concentrate resources on depressed areas which have been left behind economically. Tribal minorities account for a large part of the population in these areas and the impact of these development programs on their economic livelihood and culture can be profound. Seven case studies will be undertaken to evaluate this impact and to study the response of these communities to this outside change."

The objective was to carry out cases studies on indigenous minorities which had been recipients of regional development programs in Thailand, continental and insular Malaysia, and the Philippines in order to evaluate their impacts. Questions to be asked for the research were:

"To what extent have these programs improved the standard of living as against bringing greater impoverishment due to the loss of lands and resources? What have been the benefits of integration into a wider society and how has this integration affected tribal social structures and organizations? What responses have minorities made to these outside development programs? Have they acquiesced, engaged in hostile acts or shunned regional development through passive resistance?" (Project summary: ii)

The network project had been commented upon by several members of IDRC personnel before approval and was generally praised. As stated in the Project summary, it directly fitted "the Centre's concern for poor rural populations who live outside of the mainstream of development, people who are at political, economic and social disadvantage". The participants were estimated to be "already experienced and sensitive to the issues under investigation", and "all participants [had] extensive research experience among tribal communities and the centres to which they [were] attached are tribal research institutes in many cases" (Project summary:v). Some researchers coming from some of the tribal minorities under study, there seemed to be a guarantee for successful grassroots research with foreseeable and tangible returns in the studied communities. The project had been labelled "important and innovative" by one senior program officer.

I-2 History of the network difficulties

Circumstantial difficulties.

A major source of confusion right at the beginning of the venture was the early change in key personnel. The two main initiators of the network did quit, they were -- perhaps hastily - - replaced by new actors who had no previous relationship to each other, and here probably lies a most important circumstantial factor for the subsequent problems.

Most importantly, the initial leader of the project, A. Gomez, an anthropologist attached to the Kuala Lumpur Institute already cited, quit the group early on when offered a permanent position in an Australian University. He was replaced without consultation of the components or the donor by the coordinating institution by T.G. Lim, an economist who had participated in some of the early meetings of the group. On the donor side, the initial program officer, E. Pye, quit the Singapore office in the first months of the project to take a job at CIDA in Bangkok. No regional budget being affected to the project, another IDRC program officer, J. Voss, was asked to manage the project from Ottawa. What could have been a minor problem, i.e. the change in management personnel, got aggravated by the physical distance between the donor's representative, the coordination, and the participants. Management from Ottawa, despite the active and dedicated help from Singapore office staff, did not help to fix problems in SEA that were mostly minor ones but that, added to each other and mixed with other sources of antagonism, eventually amounted to serious difficulties.

Could the venture have been able to work more smoothly and attain its objectives if the two initiators were not gone? In terms of cohesion and leadership of the network, the answer is probably yes. Coordination would have been assumed by the person who personally solicited most participants, and this person was sharing their disciplinary background, i.e. he was an anthropologist like most of them. On the donor's side, had the program officer been in Singapore instead of Ottawa, there would certainly have been more regular communication and contacts between the donor and the recipients, and tighter control of the schedule and outputs to be

produced in accordance to the initial agreement. But even this would probably not have erased the other sources of friction visible in this network.

Structural difficulties

In this case, it seems that the initial motivation for many participants was primarily their component's interest. Component leaders interviewed for this report have clearly expressed that their initial interest was to be able to conduct a research on "their" subject, "their" tribals. When specifically asked about their feeling in taking part in this network, none expressed any excitement about actively cooperating with other components in the form of a network. Otherwise, the importance of networking was simply not mentioned. When asked about their personal evaluation of the project's results, their component's performance comes first, and they only get to talk about network performance when specifically asked about it. In this light, it becomes obvious that this network has definitely not been an internally grown initiative, that it has not met with strong enthusiasm on the part of the recipients. It seems rather that it was plainly an outside effort to connect components whose interests were only loosely related and whose leaders were only marginally interested in networking. The choice of these participants for the purpose of networking or, equally likely, the way they were presented the initiative and invited to join in, is therefore questionable.

Some of the components already existed before the network was set afoot, while some others formed only to take part in the funding opportunity. This should have been an indicator of motivation of some of the participants. The nature of each component and the feasibility of their being linked in a common endeavour could have been discussed more thoroughly as it proved afterwards to be a major source of dissatisfaction on all sides. Most importantly, and not untypically, the fracture between "academics" and "activists" proved to be a durable and pernicious one. During interviews as well as in their correspondence with the donor, the formers steadily accused the latters of putting political priorities at the top of their agenda and being emotionally engaged in their research to the point of threatening the scientific validity of their findings, while the latters accused the formers of looking first at promoting their own career

interests and not care for the tribals they were "only" studying. A good deal of literature exist on the difficulties of linking academics with grassroots actors in such endeavours, it is not necessary here to go one more time through those arguments.

There was also the international nature of the project. What are the chances for a network including components from different countries to be able to operate smoothly, to work together efficiently enough to develop a group cohesion that can take roots and attain its objectives, first thanks to the funds received and maybe afterwards even produce a viable body that could evolve independently from the initial help from the donor? This certainly is a major challenge for this sort of venture. In the case of the RDIMSEA network, linguistic, cultural, religious, political and economic differences did not only exist between the researchers -- mostly lowlanders if not foreigners -- and their object -- highland minorities --, but there was also an important cultural gap between the members themselves. These were each used to and constrained by their national academic context. They operated within different policy frameworks. They each were bounded by national research agendas. Some came from megalopolis such as Bangkok, some were based in small towns in Sabah or Luzon. On top of the early antagonism between academic and NGO worlds, we are led to suspect that there was also an urban/rural cleavage (Bangkok vs Chiang Mai or Baguio), a centre/periphery one (Kuala Lumpur vs Sabah), a local/outsider one (highlanders vs lowlanders), an Asian/Western one (Thai vs farang), a rich/poor one (University professors vs NGO workers, or Malaysia vs Philippines), a Buddhist/Muslim/Christian one (Thailand vs Malaysia vs Philippines), and so on. In this case, it could almost be said that the populations under study had definitely more in common, despite their ethnic and historical particularities, than the people funded to study them.

This observation leads us to think that there may have been a confusion, in the mind of the architects responsible for this network, in wrongly assuming that organizations studying similar people are also significantly similar between themselves. That they move on grounds and assumptions common to the point that they can be presumed to have enough in common to be able to share research priorities, ideologies and methods, and work together smoothly.

On the other hand, it can not be easily sustained that keeping the recruitment of network participants within specific cultural, political or national boundaries would prove to be more fruitful. It would certainly increase the objective working cohesion of the body (language, political framework, research agendas, values) but it could not erase ideological, economical or status dissimilarities. Group work, indeed, implies working with the other, and to reduce to a minimum the gap between participants, a sheer effort must be done to decrease the causes of conflicts between participants, even more so if they are highly different in several ways like they were in this case.

Within this framework, it can be understood that the wider the gap between participants, the more difficult will be the building of group cohesiveness, and the more likely will opposition and antagonisms pop out. The consequent conclusion is that a working body with a large gap must be carefully coordinated in terms of respect of time frame to avoid drifting, chiefly for components less tightly linked to the core of the network. But it must also be coordinated loosely in terms of the respect of specificities among individuals and local organisations that have different organisational cultures and research ideologies. The coordination must be utterly aware of the possible sources of friction between highly different participants and must be prepared to face it quickly, if not to foresee and diffuse them even before they can appear.

I-3 The problem with governance

No indication could be found that the definition of the specific role of the coordinator of the network has been a priority at the outset, not even a task among others. It seems to have been basically left to the person getting the job and to the institution to which that person belonged to define it. On the donor's side, no traces exist of an effort to make this governance different than what it eventually turned out to be: distant, top-down and institutionally oriented. To the credit of the coordinator, it must be said that part of the blame for this flaw should probably be put on the donor's representatives for failing to raise and address this crucial question at the outset, a task they could be expected to include in their routine procedure.

Some IDRC personnel and network participants have clearly stated that not only was the network leadership not satisfactory, but that it has also been in itself an important source of problems. Coming from a different disciplinary background (economics) than most of his partners (social anthropology), the coordinator appointed in replacement of the initial one did not share, and maybe even ignored, the participants disciplinary culture and priorities. From the evidence consulted for this evaluation, he seems not to have included in his duties the ones directed at strengthening the network's internal cohesion, and did little to smoothen communication between coordination and components, coordination and the donor, as well as between components.

The coordinator being also part of one of the network components, he has been depicted by members of other components as being accordingly biased. He provoked some negative reactions with other components by imperatively asking for data to be collected and sent to Kuala Lumpur in order to draw an atlas of ethnic minorities. Although not initially included in the project's outcomes to be, the possibility of working on an atlas of Southeast Asian ethnic minorities had been discussed a few times between participants. However, it had not been agreed upon during the network's life. The coordinator appears to have made such a demand without appropriate discussion being held and necessary procedures being agreed upon by the participants and the donor's representatives.

Conflicts between the coordination and components also arose because of unpredictable factors. When asked by a European agency funding the Chiang Mai component for years, and at the suggestion of the latter's director who put his confidence in his colleague, the network coordinator participated in the production of a critical evaluation of the recipient's performance. As a consequence, the donors refrained from renewing their funding and that component had to ask the program officer in charge in Ottawa to provide for the loss in order to simply perform the normal duties within the network's agenda. The relationship between the network coordinator and the leader of the Chiang Mai component never recovered from this blow. Nor did actually the one with Ottawa and Singapore staff who judged severely the diplomatic misbehaviour of the coordinator. Moreover, the coordinator did not seem to be aware — or maybe chose to ignore

—— that frictions were growing between him and the donor's representatives. The files show that from 1991 on, he made a number of demands for extra funding without appropriate justification, and that most were rejected with internal comments that indicate serious dissatisfaction and growing suspicion about him. An Ottawa officer declared to this author that from that time on, he did no more believe in the viability of this venture and decided to let go the project to an end and merely help the really working components to complete their job.

The coordinator himself, when interviewed, has however a different story to tell. He declares he has been appointed coordinator in replacement of the initial one -- one he labels a junior colleague -- plainly because he was actually the most valid candidate at that time. He acknowledges the diplomatic error regarding the Chiang Mai component but puts the essential of the blame on the component's director, who had apparently agreed with the evaluation report only to reject it afterwards. He acknowledges as well that he did not sufficiently keep in touch with each component, but only because the donor's representatives wouldn't allow him additional money to make the many necessary field trips. He deplores that the network money was sent directly to each component, depriving him from the possibility to manage it centrally. The coordinator acknowledges as well that his relationship with the donor was not good but he puts the blame on what he calls a lack of transparency of the Centre and an authoritative behaviour from the IDRC representatives. He is critical of the ASRO representatives for their bureaucratic attitude towards money, and he points at the Ottawa one for doing parts of the coordinating job he himself should have been left to do alone. This competition with Ottawa was obviously important, to the point that after the Chiang Mai component's evaluation episode, the coordinator estimates that the program officer actually had taken back all the normal duties associated with the governance of the network and dealt thereafter with each component individually. He believes that the program officer is responsible for not having taken the necessary steps to solve these problems with him rather than act authoritatively and marginalise him.

There are visibly valid arguments on all sides in this imbroglio and a good deal of the misunderstandings seems to be actually linked to the strong personalities facing each other. It is

however likely that most of the problems that popped out in relation with the network governance could have been better dealt with if the choice of the new coordinator had been discussed with the coordinating Institute and if his role had been better defined and clearly agreed upon at an early stage of the network's life. The initiative of performing this task normally goes to the donor or, at least, should be promoted by his representatives. In the absence of this early impulsion -- for reasons I couldn't identify --, the door was left wide open for a progressive sliding and the ultimate degradation that occurred afterwards.

I-4 Network outputs

The project proposal stated several outputs that were to come out from the network's activities. First, the coordinating institution in Kuala Lumpur was to produce a synthesis report with data from individual case studies; no real effort appears to have been made to materialize this task. Second, seven case studies were to be carried out, one in the Philippines, four in Malaysia, and two in Thailand. As a result, and one peninsular Malaysia case having been abandoned rapidly, six were actually being conducted at the moment of the mid term meeting in February 1991. Afterwards, if the writing of final technical reports can be an indicator of the work that has really been done, the situation is as follows. By October 1993, the Bangkok and Baguio components had given final technical and financial reports and their files were accordingly closed. A deadline was fixed to 15 December 1993 for the other components to submit their final reports. By 9 December 1993, a final technical report -- but no financial report -- was sent by the coordinator in Kuala Lumpur for the whole of the Malaysian participants, although several never wrote theirs. Ultimately, all remaining files were closed on 12 December 1994 without further reports being received. The third planned output was a research bulletin that was to be published four times a year. Eleven issues were effectively released between July 1989 and September 1992. Fourth planned output was the publishing of a comprehensive bibliography on regional development and indigenous minorities in ASEAN countries. As a single and complete publication, this did not materialize. Fifth output to be was the improvement in the research and information base for studies on tribal affairs in the region. This output being difficult to measure, it can however be assumed that the components having completed their work

have, as such, contributed to this task. Sixth, a data centre for the collection, the processing and the dissemination of information on regional development and indigenous minorities was to be established at the coordinating institution in Kuala Lumpur. It does not seem that a specific outcome can be associated with this task, although that institution has without any doubt collected and, to a certain extent, processed data gathered during the network existence. Seventh and last, national dissemination workshops were to be held for key government agencies and NGOs. To our knowledge, based on the files, all that has been done in this line by network researchers was to participate in a Common property resource Workshop held in Winnipeg from 30 Sept. to 2 Oct. 1991. The network's mid term and final workshops, held respectively in Chiang Mai (February 1991) and Kota Kinabalu (9-12 July 1992), can also be assumed to have at least partly served this task, although most participants were regulars in the network's activities. In a broader perspective, the network's contribution into the academic circles was tangible with several members presenting papers at local, regional and international conferences, and some of these were later published in academic Journals. Since many among these papers were initially written as components' reports to be presented at one of the two workshops, their existence clearly owes to the network.

The network's concrete contribution to the indigenous minorities that were under study has been minimal. The academic components can not decently pretend having had a direct impact on the populations they studied, and their possible contribution to government officials or to lawmakers in the form of recommendations has yet to be made. As is normally the case, the NGO components had a more tangible impact in the way that they were able, thanks to the funds received for the network, to go on with their grassroots activities and their ideologically oriented research agendas. Some village meetings were held and the information gathered was shared as much as was possible.

I-5 A few lessons from this experience

One IDRC program officer stated that in this case, the supporters of the initial proposal "...just did not have a good enough idea of which groups are doing really good work with indigenous minorities in the region". That person, it seems to us, had a point.

Defining what "good work" is may be a tricky task. But finding who is regularly and in priority doing work with and about indigenous minorities is easy to assess. In this case, the NGO type components did, and the highly institutionalized ones did not really. This became obvious during the network lifetime, but we are convinced that it was also detectable at the early stages of the project. Tighter selection criteria for participants to the network could have led to a more homogeneous team composition, and here, homogeneity not only refers to a higher degree of similarity between the components, their nature and their methodologies. It also means a more intimately linked set of working ideologies and a more complete understanding of each other's particularities and specific tasks. Doing this legwork at an early stage of team work is a demanding job, it must be skilfully conducted, but the reward in the future life of the team is likely to be worth it. To succeed, this burden is to be shared between the network initiators, be they from the donor organisation or from the recipients' ones or, ideally, from both.

Mixing together NGOs and academic institutions into the same network requires a good deal of swiftness, genuine mutual understanding of basic similarities and differences between components, and should require discussion between participants (ideally in the donor's presence) to establish clearly what are the objectives, the capacities and the means of each of them. It could prove to be profitable to make disciplinary background of participants, shared initial assumptions and methods, discussion on objectives and on leadership inseparable parts of the setting afoot of a network.

NGO type organisations have a tendency — it often even is a necessity — to manage several funds and project at once in order to simply survive and be capable of doing the essentials of their task. Such almost inevitable spreading of energy between several priorities and

even perhaps between several networks, poses the question of the capacity for these less permanent structures to select priorities in accordance to the needs of one particular network. If networking is to reduce workload among participants instead of increasing it as it should be expected to do on the long run, it may be so only after a certain time of work during which the participants have been investing in it. Fragile organizations may not have the necessary "energy capital" to be able to wait for hypothetical results. If they try to, they are likely put their life on the line. The Chiang Mai component in the RDIMSEA network was a typical example of this.

On the other hand, highly institutionalized components like universities and the participants they provided for networking as described above, are highly bureaucratic and are normally in no need of the donor's money to survive and perform their normal duties. Such participants naturally tend to be less implicated with their object of research, they are less dedicated and, often, they pursue a personal research and career agenda. Prejudices are common when academics look at NGO workers, and the other way around too. This might be inevitable at the outset and should be dealt with accordingly.

Governance always turns out to be a key issue in any project, even more so in networks where participants in different locations do not share the daily agenda and activities that help forge a sense of belonging as it does, for example, inside one component. In the RDIMSEA network case, it has been singled out in different terms and manners by several actors, including the coordinator himself, to be the main reason for the collapse of the project. To a certain extend, this can be taken as true. The coordinator's identity, attitude and behaviour, the role of the IDRC representatives, the mutual expectations between the coordinator and these representatives, as well as the delicate relationship between each component and, on one side, the coordinator and, on the other, the donor's representatives, could be more thoroughly investigated to get a realistic and useful picture of the set of problems that contributed to make this network a disappointing experience for all participants.

II- WHAT POSSIBLE FUTURE FOR A NETWORK ON INDIGENOUS MINORITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA?

IDRC's new Asia Strategy and Program as presented in the first draft of 30 June 1994 and update of 19 January 1995, states:

"The fundamental premises of the Asia Program remain those of empowerment through knowledge, support for development research and capacity-building, poverty alleviation and sustainable development." (Draft 2, p.17)

It is clear that several members of the RDIMSEA network on indigenous minorities as well as a number of potential new components in a possible new network on the same subject do share these objectives. At this moment, several of the Centre's key issues and objectives in its Asia Program are being addressed in a number of ongoing projects.

However, since the RDIMSEA network was conceived in 1988, considerable economic development took place in Malaysia and Thailand in particular and, to a lesser degree, in the Philippines. Some of the major Centre's objectives regarding its Southeast Asian partners are nowadays well on their way to be achieved in these three countries, although it is disputable to assess that this recent national wealth reaches highland indigenous minorities to the same extent than lowlanders from the national majorities.

In the light of these recent developments, the Centre is accordingly moving its national focus in Southeast Asia from these newly developed countries to other ones where its help is more urgently needed. It is not likely then that Thailand and Malaysia in particular, in their actual stage of economic and social development, would still be acceptable in the list of direct recipients for a possible future network on indigenous minorities in the region.

On the other hand, in a new venture that would eventually involve countries of the Southeast Asian massif where highland minorities still exist (see below), Thailand could play a useful although indirect role. Thailand has developed a sound expertise about its highland

minorities during the last 30 years. Being for decades the only politically stable and conflict free country in the Southeast massif region, being also considerably helped by the United States as a key ally during the Second Indochina War (1964-75), it had the necessary time and energy to get to know its own indigenous minorities, and a large number of foreign researchers have contributed to a body of scholarly literature that exceeds by far that of any neighbouring country on this subject. In this light, Thailand could very well take a role in indirect participation and as a support base for research and exchange between participants of an overall network working with highland minorities in the region.

What is the utility of networking as a specific form of action on indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia? If the basic assumption pleading for the creation by donors of externally driven networks as stated in "Discussion paper on networks: A point of departure" (Jan.94) are still considered valid — i.e. economy of scale and impact on large numbers, facilitative transfer of knowledge and technology from advanced to less advanced, and institutional surrogates — then there is definitely a point considering the possibility of a new network of bodies concerned with indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia. A new network that could put to use the lessons learned from recent experience and be more fit to avoid the pitfalls of the preceding one.

In order to keep at a minimum the replacement of factors that could structure that possible new venture, and to allow the Centre to be able to operate an action in a reasonably near future, we will not challenge here the very structure of IDRC networking strategy. The following propositions play by the actual rules and present a variation on a known theme rather than a speculative initiative.

The needs initially identified in the "Regional development and indigenous minorities in Southeast Asia" network project proposal, the objectives and most of the desired outcomes included to the 1988 proposal, were valid ones at that time and, by most researchers' opinion concerned with these questions, still are. In the task of looking for objectives, it is then not necessary to re-do what had been correctly done. On the other hand, more can certainly be said concerning the choice of populations under study.

The RDIMSEA network had linked indigenous populations in quite a variety of regions and cultural areas under the assumption that they belonged to an entity called "Southeast Asia". But Southeast Asia as a regional political body has only a very short existence, i.e. less than 30 years. As far as historic, ethno-linguistic and anthropological classification are concerned, linking highlanders in Sabah, from ancient proto- and deuteromalay origin, with highlanders in Northern Thailand, of very recent arrival, and this in two very different ecoregions -- to say nothing of the Philippines --, was a choice bounded to cope with as many differences than similarities. As an indicator of this variety is the fact that the final activities reports that have been produced for that network hardly link to each other, and if the ethnic variety in the population basin chosen can not be labelled the only reason for that, it certainly must be pointed a major one.

Focusing more tightly on one ecoregion and a closer cultural identity can definitely be of some help. It can be found in the continental Southeast Asian massif. Politically divided between six countries (southern China, eastern India, the northern parts of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam), it represents a basin of nationally marginal but nonetheless culturally related populations practising very similar economic activities highly determined by a shared ecosystem. Almost each of these groups straddles across national boundaries and has close relatives in one or several of the neighbouring national entities. The Hmong (or Meo, Miao), for instance, are to be found in notable numbers in five of these countries (except India), totalling more than 5 million individuals.

Most importantly from the perspective of establishing a horizontally linked network aimed at studying the impact of development programs on indigenous minorities, these groups also share a similarly problematic relationship with their respective states, a difficult cohabitation rooted in cultural and religious differences, historic defiance, periods of violent opposition to lowland rule, and more recently authoritarian policies of sedentarization and forced inclusion into the market economy. They all inhabit geo-strategic areas along international borders that are not always peaceful. They all traditionally dwell on highlands that have recently become highly sensitive parts of national watersheds that are said by central powers to be in urgent need of protection at all costs.

There is no point for IDRC to attempt tackling this complex situation as a whole. A more tightly focused action should be envisaged and, incidentally, a favourable conjuncture does exist. At this moment, IDRC has five ongoing projects involving highland minorities in four of those six countries (see Appendice 1). This conjuncture is extremely favourable for the possibly rapid establishment of a coordinating body between these ongoing projects — if needed — and the respective recipient/research institutions, this for three reasons.

The first is that there is an obvious horizontal linkage possibility between these projects, as much in terms of connection between the issues being addressed as well as on the grounds of their total or partial disciplinary focuses, i.e. social sciences. The second is that, based on the evaluation of the former network performance, linking existing components sounds more promising than creating some or all of them for the sake of networking. Every local partners actually involved in those individual projects are therefore already IDRC partner, they have already been evaluated with a sufficiently high mark to be part of an IDRC funded project. This should be a indicator of potential compatibility with the purpose of networking. Thirdly, already existing components possess a working structure strong enough to be able to internally provide replacement for a key participant that could have to leave during the endeavour, one of the major problems encountered by the RDIMSEA network.

A majority of these local partners are actually from the academic world, and NGO type partners are almost totally absent. There are two ways of coping with this — perhaps undesirable — specialization. Either IDRC seeks supplementary partners from the NGO sphere, or it makes the future network an academic one. The second option might better be avoided as it is not normally in the Centre's habits to support purely academic works, and the pitfalls of such high flying level of research are well known. A more balanced composition might then request to recruit new or secondary NGO type partners on location, or graft on this nucleus of 5 partners one or two more action-oriented ongoing IDRC projects. Actually, IDRC has another clearly related and quite well balanced ongoing project in the Southeast Asia region, one that involves indigenous minorities in the Cordillera of northern Luzon, the Philippines (91-0074 *Indigenous Practices and State Policy in the Sustainable Management of Agricultural Lands and Forests in*

the Cordillera). In its earlier form, that project was part of the RDIMSEA network and kept a very good record of academic as well as participatory research. It could most probably fit smoothly with the new venture. Its few differences with the IDRC projects in the Southeast Asia massif -- chiefly about different ethnic identities and ecosystem -- as compared with the similarities -- highland-lowland dichotomy, ethnic minority different from the national identity, difficult relationship with the State -- should not outweighs the advantages of having it grafted to the main nucleus.

In term of governance for this new network, lessons from the RDIMSEA network suggest a few tracks that might be safer to follow. At the earliest stages of discussion, all potential participants should have an opportunity to meet and express clearly their motivations and expectations. IDRC representatives should take the initiative to thoroughly discuss with every component all issues related to the coordination of the project. The largest possible consensus should be sought in key matters as the identity of the coordinator, his mode of selection and demotion (i.e. democratic vs authoritative mode), the duration of his mandate, the extend as well as the limits of his powers, and his institutional affiliation. In particular, discussion over the identity of the network leader might include such things as his/her disciplinary background, outspoken dedication to the research topic, capacities as a mediator and a communicator, and capacity as an administrator. Originality should be encouraged and, for example, the possibility of a bi-cephalus coordination or a rotation of coordinator from each of the different components could be discussed. The specific duties of the coordinator and those of the donor's representatives should be detailed and agreed upon. The extend of every actor's control over the budget should be clearly stated. The expectations towards desirable outputs of the network should be put clearly on the table and agreed upon, and academic components and NGOs could be allowed to have different tasks as they operate in different traditions with different values and methodologies (i.e. programme planning by objectives). The tasks, the methods and the rights and duties of each component should be stated as clearly as possible. Do these components and these people want to network together? What are their motivations to do so? According to them, what would be the role of the network regarding the work already being done in each location? What are the issues that would gain to be addressed collectively? What are the private zones in each situation whose

boundaries the network should not be allowed to trespass? What should be the lifespan of the network? An early group discussion could contribute to prevent misunderstandings about each other's tasks and responsibilities further down the road.

Concerning the coordinating institution in particular, it could be decided that it should not be one of the direct participants to one of the specific projects linked to the network, this in order to avoid national biases or that local research agendas can interfere with the network's own one. In line with this suggestion, a possible partner just appeared in the region that might deserve to be paid attention and may be of some value for a future network on indigenous minorities. A project for the creation of a *Centre for Ethnic Studies and Development*, to be attached to the University of Chiang Mai in Thailand, has recently been accepted for funding by the Ford Foundation. The proposal was prepared jointly by the Social Research Institute and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, both at the University of Chiang Mai. The Centre's *raison d'être* is to be used as a research and training institute for ethnic studies and development in mainland Southeast Asia. Its first objective is to

"Promote policy-oriented academic research on ethnicity and ethnic relations in north mainland Southeast Asia: northern Thailand, northern Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and southern China."

Its range of activities includes academic research as well as NGO workers training sessions, regional researcher's workshops, and hilltribe language courses. As stated before, Thailand has developed an expertise on highland minorities that its neighbour could profitably tap, and the creation of this Centre could very well serve this task.

Another key issue has to be clearly addressed and properly answered. It is the place to assign to participants involved in the conducting of the research process and belonging themselves to the minorities under study. This is a sensitive issue. As convinced as we might be of the necessity that grassroots representatives should participate in the research process, by no means can it be stated that indigenous researchers are automatically better than non-indigenous ones.

This would be a naive position that would ignore the internal antagonisms and conflicts inherent to every local community. How to choose such a person? On what criteria? The more literate they would be and the more able to participate in conceptual work on their own group, the more likely they will be somewhat alienated from their peers as most of them are still either nomadic, lineage based, or pre-literate peasant societies. Electing individual partners from acephalus societies is a tricky exercise. A compromise position should be sought out, one where educated participants could be considered as enlightened readers of their own cultural contexts, as opposed to outside observers, rather than representatives for the group they belong to. In terms of collectivity, the possible participation of minorities to the network is an easier issue to tackle. Holding village meetings, returning the information to the participants and seeking their opinion on policy recommendations is feasible, and it is actually being done in most of the ongoing projects that could be linked to this network. The Philippines project, for instance, has developed to a great extent its capacity to integrate villagers in the research process and to return to them with consultation meetings.

Another factor to keep in mind in discussing the possibility of networking between the above mentioned components is the different political ideologies they belong to. Laos and Vietnam and, in a different way, China are still quite conservative Socialist regimes and operate on different premises than frankly Capitalist neighbours like, say, Thailand or the Philippines. India is still a strong believer in the virtues of non-alignment. These specificities have concrete impacts like, in the Socialist countries, the non-existence of local NGOs or the impossibility for the donor to simply pick up the local partner he prefers. In these circumstances, the selection of the coordinator and his institution could be a sensitive issue and would require from the chosen leader additional communication and negotiation skills.

APPENDICE 1

Ongoing IDRC projects in the continental Southeast Asia massif.

INDIA 94-8308 *Sustainable land use options for shifting cultivation (Nagaland)*

A four year project that begun in 1994-5 aimed at enabling local researchers to work with village communities and helping traditional swiddeners to strengthen village-level institutions in the management of natural resources.

Recipient institution: Office of the Agricultural Production Commissioner (Nagaland).

Research institution: State Agriculture Research Station (Yisemyong, Nagaland)

CHINA 94-8011 *Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development in Xishuangbanna Biosphere Reserve (Yunnan)*

A three year project that begun in 1994 aiming at developing innovations in the management of biodiversity by focusing on the conflicts with livelihoods of minority ethnic groups.

Recipient institution: Chinese National Committee for Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, Beijing. Research institutions: 1) Institute of Ecology and Geobotany, Yunnan University; 2) Xishuangbanna Nature Reserve.

VIETNAM-I 92-003 *Biodiversity and Sustainable Development of Swidden Agriculture in Northern Vietnam*

A three year project that begun in 1993 aiming at contributing to the stabilization of swidden agriculture in Vietnam through development of viable agriculture and socio-economic plans that facilitate more efficient and economic land-use. Recipient institution: Centre for Natural Resources Management and Environmental Studies, Hanoi.

VIETNAM-II 93-1006 *Le défi forestier au Vietnam / The Challenge of the forest in Vietnam*

A two year training/research project begun in 1994 and using a collaborative research project as a vehicle for training. Its research focus is the sustainable and equitable use of the country's forest resources and its central objective is to analyze the complex of underlying causes of deforestation so that policy and technological options can be developed.

Recipient institution: Université Laval, Québec. Research institutions: 1) Université d'agriculture et de foresterie, Ho Chi Minh City; 2) Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies, Hanoi.

LAOS 91-0095 *Resource Management in Nam Ngum Watershed*

A one year project that has begun in 1992 and went through several reconduction since. It studies the livelihoods and resource management practices of upland agricultural villages, with a focus on local resource utilization conflicts in two adjacent, but ethnically distinct resettled villages. Another objective is to develop the research capacity of Lao government officials.

Recipient institution: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao P.D.R. Research institution: Environmental Protection Office, Department of Forestry and Environment, Ministry of A&F.
