

# **IDRC Networks:**

## **An Ethnographic Perspective**

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## **Jean Michaud**

### **The Impact of Regional Development Programs on Indigenous Minorities**

This review of the Regional Development and Indigenous Minorities Network in Southeast Asia (RDIMSEA) studies the impact of regional development programs on indigenous minorities in Thailand, Continental and Insular Malaysia, and the Philippines. RDIMSEA was an externally conceived network that grouped NGOs, academics, and a coordinating office. The RDIMSEA network had a difficult and troubled existence from the start. A major source of confusion was an early change in key personnel. The main initiators of the network quit and were hastily replaced by individuals with no previous working relationship. This was likely the most important factor in the subsequent problems that were experienced. The project was concerned with the participation of representatives of indigenous minorities and attempted to involve researchers who were themselves members of the minority groups. Efforts to recruit membership from minority groups met with limitations of language, insufficient levels of education, absence of administrative and political structures with which to work, and generally low interest in the venture. It is likely that the initial motivation for many participants was primarily their own interests. When questioned about taking part in this network, none expressed any excitement about actively cooperating with other components of the network. Because this network was not internally grown, it did not receive the necessary push from enthusiastic recipients to become an operational and durable network.

The regional nature of the project also presented some problems. Linguistic, cultural, religious, political, and economic differences existed between the researchers and the minority groups and an important cultural gap existed between the members themselves. The network wrongly assumed that organizations studying similar people were similar. Networks imply that groups must work with each other. The wider the gap between participants, the more difficult the building of cohesiveness, and the more likely the development of opposition.

Major conclusions and recommendations of the study include:

1. The project failed to define a specific role for the coordinator of the network.
2. There was a lack of common understanding about how the network should operate, a lack of transparency, and there was competition with the donor.
3. A focus on a single ecoregion, or on groups with closer cultural identity, would have been helpful.
4. Active participation of indigenous minorities in the research process and in decision-making could have been more clearly addressed in the project.
5. A mix of institutions in the same project requires a genuine mutual understanding of basic similarities and differences between components and requires discussion between participants.

6. If networks are to reduce workload among participants, instead of increasing it, this may only occur after a certain amount of time is invested by the participants. Fragile organizations may not have the necessary “energy capital” to be able to wait for the intended results. The network mechanism therefore must be developed in close conjunction with the realities of its prospective members.
7. Coordination is always a key issue in a network. A lack of coordination was singled out as the main reason for the collapse of the project.
8. At the earliest stages of discussion, all potential participants should have an opportunity to meet and express their motivations and expectations. Donor representatives should take the initiative to discuss with all participants.
9. Two key questions were not addressed when the network was conceived:  
What is the utility of networking as a specific form of action in this context?  
What is the operational value of a concept such as “indigenous minorities” in Southeast Asia?