## Report on visit to Chieng Mai, Mae Sod and Bangkok from 22 January to 29 January 2011.

The main purpose of this visit was to consult with Mr. Nikos Dacanay and his collaborators regarding their project: The Internet Shops/Centers: Empowering Women Migrant Workers and Refugees in Thailand.

This short report has two parts. The first is a basic description of my travels to Chieng Mai and Mae Sod, including some impressions of the field. The second part discusses some of the ethnographic and theoretical issues I discussed with Nikos and his collaborators.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Field itinerary**

I departed Manila on 22 January 2011 and travelled to Chieng Mai on the same day. I arrived in the late afternoon and after a brief rest, met Nikos Dacanay for our first discussion of the project. We spent several hours talking about the project, including both the difficulties and the possibilities of further investigations. After a late dinner, we returned to my hotel where I spent some time reading their preliminary reports.

The next day 23 January was spent visiting Nikos' office (WEAVE) and talking to the staff about their NGO work. I discussed some of the issues related to the project with Weave director Maria Urgel. The rest of the day was spent sightseeing around Chieng Mai and in the evening I finished reading the second of Nikos' report.

Early the next morning (24 January) we took the bus to Mae Sod, a trip lasting over 7 hours. We arrived in the late afternoon and settled into our hotel. During the long bus trip, Nikos and I had the chance to discuss aspects of the project in more detail as well as finding out the background of his Filipino collaborators as well as his colleagues in Chieng Mai and Mae Sod.

On 25 January, we went for a long walk around Mae Sod, visiting the local markets and some of the Internet shops frequented by Burmese people. I was struck both by the number of Burmese and their domination of the local market. Surprisingly, many of the Burmese did not speak Thai, indicating either their short sojourn in the country or their lack of assimilation into local society. I was also surprised at the low numbers of Internet customers, at least compared to the Philippines, and who mostly consisted of teenaged boys or young men. I was informed that these Internet shops are busier later in the evenings, after school or after working hours. It seemed that very few Burmese (men or women)

frequented Internet cafes. I was informed that some Burmese women frequent an Internet cafe close to their work but most seem to use computers available at work. There are several practical reasons for this choice, of which the availability of appropriate software (Burmese rather than Thai fonts) as well as the relative safety of the workplace are among the most important factors. Later that evening, the whole staff of WEAVE went out to dinner in a lovely restaurant apparently supported by a member of the Thai royalty. This occasion gave me the opportunity to talk to other members of WEAVE, including some Burmese women from Karen and other ethnic backgrounds. I was also able to inform myself better about the other projects being conducted by WEAVE.

The following day, 26 January was spent visiting more Internet cafes as well as a centre (Community Capacity Building Committee - CCBC) run by Burmese refugees/migrants from several ethnic groups such as Karen, Karennis, Shan, Arakan and Palaung. Most of the day was spent in this centre as Nikos and Malut Feranil were conducting interviews of migrant/refugee women. I was surprised at the degree of political organization of the members of the centre given their limited resources and training. The centre was a hive of activity as people came and went conducting their various tasks. A computer training program was being conducted on this day and I observed young migrants/refugees keenly absorbing the new communication technology. This technical competence will allow them to communicate with their kin overseas and in Burma as well as conduct political campaigns s essential for their political cause. I was impressed by the assortment of ethnic backgrounds present at the centre and the irony that some could only communicate with one another in either Burmese or English since their respective ethnic languages were mutually incomprehensible. Clearly their common political cause encourages them to surmount ethnic, religious and cultural differences. Imagine therefore my surprise when I asked some of them if they would marry inter-ethnically – their response was that they would not, preferring instead to marry someone from their own ethnic background. It seems that ethnic identities are still very important even in conditions of political disenfranchisement and diasporic life. This reminds us that cosmopolitanism does not always eliminate local identities and may in some cases even strengthen them. The large numbers of some ethnic groups such as the Karens, Karennis and others present in Mae Sod allow their members to constitute viable communities and maintain ethnic differences. Given the large numbers of foreigners also present in Mae Sod, Burmese refuges/migrants seem to have developed a sophisticated understanding of the global condition while also holding to a form of local cosmopolitanism.

I also had the opportunity to talk to several workers in the centre and, as expected, heard astonishing stories of their dangerous encounters with the Burmese military authorities. While we were at the centre, several members had just been released from overnight detention by the Thai police for having inadequate identity papers. This example is a good illustration of the insecurities experienced by migrants/refugees as they try to navigate everyday life in Mae Sod. It is therefore no surprise that they avoid public spaces such as Internet Cafes, whenever possible.

Later in the afternoon we visited the Thai-Burmese border several kilometres outside Mae Sod. The scene was idyllic and peaceful and the border guards surprisingly friendly. But only a few months earlier, there were reports of heavy fighting near the border that resulted in 20,000 refugees crossing from Burma to Thailand. Apparently on the behest of the Burmese authorities, most of these refugees were

repatriated back to Burma since Thailand does not formally accept their status as legitimate refugees but only as displaced persons. Despite these difficulties, the border itself seemed peaceful and a thriving economy of handicrafts and other goods were readily available on the Thai side of the border. As in the market place, vendors were mostly Burmese with little fluency in Thai. That evening I had a good discussion with Nikos and Malut following the interesting if limited observations I experienced during my short stay.

January 27 was my last day at Mae Sod. I had a final meeting with Nikos and Malut over breakfast and lunch before catching my plane in the afternoon back to Bangkok. Our discussions covered both empirical and theoretical questions. I was impressed by the data the group was able to acquire given the difficult conditions of fieldwork. Not only was the question of language a complex one – only Nikos spoke Thai, while his Filipino collaborators had some acquaintance of Thai culture. The migrants/refugees themselves came from a variety of language backgrounds – Burmese, Karen, Kachin, Shan, etc – often the most convenient language was English but this was clearly a limitation for many of the informants.

I returned to Bangkok in the evening of January 27. The next day was spent resting and collecting my thoughts about the interesting if complex situation characterizing Nikos' project.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Reflections on the project and conversations with collaborators and informants**

Much has been written about the emancipatory possibilities of the new media of communication. The mobile phone has without doubt been one of the most successful technologies ever. Its low cost and simple operation has enabled even non-literate users to partake in the wonders of modern technology. The capacity to remain in contact with relatives and friends in an age of increasing mobility has compensated for some of the instabilities of the modern condition. In addition, it has enabled expanding social networks, including strangers, hitherto unusual in traditional cultures. These new social ties have also deepened or widened existing relationships. In particular, SMS (texting) favours the expression of feelings and thoughts awkward and embarrassing in face-to-face exchanges. Consequently, the mobile is not only a communicative devise but also affects how people think of themselves and of others. These new ways of thinking and feeling have practical consequences for action. The most dramatic example of which is the increase in political mobilization associated with the new media, initially the mobile but increasing the Internet. As importantly, the new media is also used for more instrumental purposes such as inquiring about jobs and economic opportunities. In the Philippines mobiles are used for transferring money, thereby avoiding the costs of financial transactions, following market prices and other useful economic information. There is little doubt that the new media can culturally, politically and

economically empower ordinary people. Some even claim that ordinary people, hitherto excluded from the public sphere, can now participate in its decisions. Even civil society, often seen as decreasing in importance as a consequence of high mobility and social change, may be invigorated by the new media. However, these promises and possibilities of the new media have to be empirically ascertained rather than merely announced. This project is an attempt to empirically investigate how the new media may be used by Burmese migrant/refugee women to uplift their life conditions.

Having acknowledged the transformative potential of the new media, one must guard against accepting a technological determinism for its effects. The consequences of technology are the result of people's choice of use, including often unexpected ones, such as the popularity of texting instead of voice calls. However, what technology does is provide new conditions of possibility. The dramatic use of Facebook to challenge authoritarian and despotic regimes is the most recent example of these new conditions being enacted. Originally conceived as a way for young people to stay in touch and expand their social networks, Facebook was used as a tool for political mobilization. The technology made this mobilization possible but did not foresee its use nor guarantee its success. Social networking was generally seen as an activity for self-obsessed western youth but was instead used by politically disenfranchised people. A technology designed for culturally alienated individuals was used to mobilize a politically disconnected population.

Finally, one must acknowledge that while the technology may be widely accessible, it nevertheless depends on technical and cognitive skills. The mere provision of physical structures, even under economically favourable conditions is not sufficient. While the mobile is indeed easily adapted, as shown by its wide acceptance globally, the Internet requires more skills such as literacy in an appropriate language. While these skills are quickly learnt by young people who see the technology as an everyday tool, older people face greater difficulties. As already mentioned, technology does not only affect our actions in the material world, it also presumes changes in the inner subjective world. Young people naturally accept these inner-worldly changes but older people, socialized under different conditions, find it harder to accept new subjectivities. This is not to argue that older people are more resistant to new technologies but merely to emphasize that their uptake depends on re-structuring earlier habits. Migration and other contemporary dislocations may indeed predispose even older people to learn new communicative practices.

The conditions above need to be appreciated before we assess the capacities of the communication media to empower its users. Marginal members with little access to the public sphere may indeed profit from the new media to allow access to wider structures. But these structures of marginality have to be understood before predictions for its amelioration are made. Marginality has different aspects of which gender, education and class are among the most important. Furthermore, its manifestations may be cultural, political or economic. Restricted access to public spaces may affect women more than men, the lack of formal educational skills in literacy and numeracy may constrain potential users, financial resources limit the capacity to overcome these former barriers.

The project is meant to assess the effects of the Internet in empowering Burmese migrant/refugee women. While the technology may have the capacity to empower its users by connecting them to

broader structures, it use is determined by factors that often prevent users from utilizing its potential. Burmese migrant/refugee women generally lack the skills to fully utilize the potential of the new media. While mobiles are widely used and allow women to access information and keep track of developments affecting their lives, the Internet requires more training and while some women successfully obtain such training, the majority are unable to do so. Literacy and technical competence are the main impediments but political/social factors also prevent women from benefitting from the technology. Public Internet cafes may be readily available at affordable costs but the lack of language skills (Thai-English) prevents most women from using them. Moreover, the mobility of migrants/refugees is greatly constrained and entering public areas is fraught with the danger of being apprehended by the police. This was illustrated by the case of the NGO workers mentioned earlier. Most of them confine themselves to their work place and residence. Even marketing and other forays into public space are minimized. This is the main reason why Internet cafes are poorly attended by Burmese migrants/refugees. The solution would be to provide more facilities in their places of work or to ensure that the Internet is available in private spaces such as the homes of migrants/refugees.

While the women mentioned are socially and culturally constrained, the local economy is heavily depended on them. Migrants, legal and illegal, provide essential domestic services and other low skilled jobs. The local market is dominated by migrants, contradicting what appears as otherwise marginal positions in local society. This imbalance between economic, political and cultural roles is one reason why the new communication technology fails to deliver its potential for empowerment. The Community Capacity Building Committee (CCBC) is a good example of this uneven potential. The young women and men visiting the centre are clearly strongly motivated to elevate their position in local society by acquiring technical and social skills but are prevented from doing so because of the insecurity of their lives. The emancipatory capacities of technology depend on pre-existing structures.

This project is well conceived but in the process of its accomplishment, the limiting effects of broader socio-political factors were revealed. One of the most important problems encountered by the researchers is the complex linguistic situation in the field. While Mr. Dacanay seems to have sufficient skills in Thai, the other researchers depended on interpreters for basic information. To complicate matters, even a facility for Burmese would not have been sufficient since many informants are more comfortable in their local language such as Karen or Arakan. While local Thai researchers may have helped, the political situation of many migrants/refugees would have inhibited them from revealing personal information with potentially dangerous implications. It is not surprising that most NGO workers in the border areas are foreigners rather than Thai, since the government does not fully recognize the perilous conditions of migrants/refugees. Having failed to ratify the international convention on the treatment and rights of refugees, one cannot expect the Thai government to provide adequate resources for the large numbers of migrants/refugees currently living in the country. Thailand has enough problems of its own to deal with and is itself undergoing a process of democratization with the expected instabilities.

The main purpose of the project was to assess how the new media, in particular the Internet, enables migrant/refugee woman to improve their position in local society. The presence of Internet cafes in Mae Sod makes it feasible for migrant women to use the technology to seek information about jobs and

other opportunities. However, most of these women do not have the skills to make practical use of the Internet either because their language skills are inadequate for the technology or they lack easy access to these cafes. As mentioned earlier, the mobile phone is a more suitable technology both because it requires lower technical skills and may be used in private spaces. Dacanay reports that mobiles are extensively used in refugee camps but the Internet is either not allowed or extremely restricted. This lack of access to the Internet in camps is deliberate and presumably reflects the Thai authorities' fear that it may be used for political mobilization.

Migrants as opposed to refugees have more access to public facilities outside the camps. They take full advantage of this access as revealed in the local market where they play a major role. These migrants are also employed in many local industries, including some multinational companies that have set up factories near the border, presumably to take advantage of cheap labor, leading some NGOs to object to the working conditions. Many NGOs have set up local craft manufacturing to assist migrants and provide them with improved skills. In this way, many of their workers have taken advantage of this opportunity to improve their computer-based skills. Migrant/refugee women who have these computer skills use the computer cafes during their free time.

**Conclusion**

Considering the limitations of time and resources available to the team, I doubt that they could have done a better job in investigating the potential of the new communication media for migrant/refugee women in Mae Sod. Given both the political and linguistic contexts within which the project is based, any attempt to conduct serious research is severely constrained. While potential informants are easily encountered, cultural, linguistic and political factors make it difficult for researchers to delve deeply into the real causes leading to the relative lack of interest in using the new media. Their questionnaire handed out to owners of computer shops provided some explanations but personal interviews revealed more significant reasons for this communicative potential to be underutilized.

With the benefit of hindsight, members of the team could have linked the use of mobiles in refugee camps with the use of the Internet outside the camps. There seems to be a number of women with access to camps while based outside who could have been used as informants for the possible connections of the new media. But it takes a lot of time to develop the rapport and intimacy necessary for migrants/refugees to reveal intimate and personal details of their communicative practices. What people say and what people do when unobserved are often widely disparate, particularly in circumstances when discretion and caution are in order. Another possible set of informants might have been obtained from people with relatives abroad and with whom they exchange political views. In fact, Mr. Dacanay's team have very good relationships and connections with a broad range of individuals and groups who could provide this information but a lack of time prevented them from exploiting this resource more fully. Finally, the project would have profited from a more theoretical approach. Burmese migrant/refugee women are clearly marginal but their position in local society is more complex that a single dimension of marginality may indicate. Power and positionality were mentioned in the report but these concepts could have been further developed. The literature on the subjective effects of the new media technology could have been explored for insights into their consequences locally. The project seemed to focus on the political potential of the new media but their cultural potential could be just as important. This cultural potential was mentioned in the case of informants discovering and sharing

music and other cultural products through the new media, thereby enriching their ethnic identities. In some ways, culture has the greatest potential provided by the new media, as is shown by the globalization of popular culture. In Mae Sod as in most other cases, young people access the Internet and use their mobiles to share experiences through games or to communicate the latest development in popular tastes. This relatively apolitical stance has in fact led to significant political transformation. In the new media, the adage that the personal is political has had unexpected consequences.

This project is ripe for further research but will require more developed anthropological skills, time and resources for its completion. In the given circumstances, I think that Mr. Dacanay's team have done a very good job and should be commended for it.

Summary:

Original research often disproves what one initially expected. What the Thailand project revealed is that technology is only useful in context. While the mobile requires less context, the internet is dependent on more context. Thailand offers sophisticated communication media to its people but deliberately excludes refugees and migrants - possibly because it knows that access to these media may provoke calls for social and political change. Mobiles are readily available in camps but the internet is not allowed. Refugees/migrants living outside camps can access computer cafes but only if they have the necessarily technical and social skills - e.g. an adequate level of literacy in Thai or Burmese. The technology is physically accessible but culturally delimited. A major lesson learnt is that more effort has to be placed in translating computer software programs into local languages. But for those people who can use the technology, the results are highly significant. Much of the political and social objectives of refugee/migrant NGOs' are mostly achieved through access to the new technology. If the internet became available in refugee camps and the software is accessible, who knows what political, economic and cultural changes will result.

Raul Pertierra

Asian Centre

University of the Philippines

Diliman, Quezon City

Philippines