Dawei project: clear sky for a few, dark cloud for many
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The media has recently reported that the sky is now clear over Dawei for the Italian-Thai Development Company (ITD), the developer of the Dawei deep seaport and industrial estate project. For the thousands of people for whom Dawei has been their home for generations, there are only dark clouds on the horizon.

Since ITD received a last-minute nod from Myanmar’s former regime military junta in late 2008 to develop the Dawei Project, the Company has failed to make any significant progress. The Project has encountered many challenges, ranging from weak commitment and support from the new regime, difficulties in securing financing to growing local resistance and criticism from civil society both in Thailand and Myanmar.

The Thai Government is attempting to rescue the project. The Thailand Transport Minister Chadchat Sittipunt states: "...this Project will unlikely survive without government support since it is too big for a single private firm to develop".

The Dawei Deep Seaport and Industrial Estate Development Project site.
Environmental experts and civil society activists in Thailand question the legitimacy of the government’s decision that will lead to spending public resources to patronize a private project, while fostering investment in creating a highly polluting industrial park ten times the size of Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate in Rayong Province. For two decades, Thai society has witnessed the plight of people living and working in the vicinity of Map Ta Phut, whose well being has been degraded by severe industrial pollution. To date, these serious problems remain unresolved.

The Government has relentlessly provided a one sided, upbeat perspective about the Project. Key figures in the government bombard the general public with positive rhetoric—the (promising) gateway to Dawei—the region’s new trade route, the Project that will pave new economic opportunity, and increase GDP by 1.9 percent.

The Government has been pushing to conclude bilateral agreements (with its Myanmar counterpart), and hasten related infrastructure schemes, e.g. construction of road links (motorway) and rail-link to connect the country’s eastern seaboard with Dawei, pipeline systems for energy transportation, which will be worth more than 100 billion Baht in total.

Proclaiming Dawei as the new investment heaven, the Thailand Minister of Transport revealed that construction of the Project’s entire infrastructure would require investment worth 1.4 trillion Baht, and promised to ensure sufficient incentives to attract both Thai and international investors.

If (Thai) society only listened to the loudest voice, they might think the 250 square kilometer area designated for the Project is just an empty piece of property waiting to be transformed into something more meaningful by satiating Thailand’s hunger for economic growth. But, in a just and civil society, it is also important to listen to the voices rarely heard in the mainstream media—the opinion of communities most affected by proposed development—and to try to understand why any position of resistance is legitimate.

Immediately after the first meeting of the Thai-Myanmar Joint High Level Committee (JHC) on the Dawei Special Economic Zone in Bangkok, 7 November 2012, the tension in Dawei intensified. Several media venues in Myanmar reported that the local authorities and the ITD attempted to ‘force’ more than 32,000 people to move out of the area by June 2013.

Three groups will be moved from their ancestral homes—first, the villagers living on the land designated for the ‘deep-sea port and industrial estate’, second, those along the road-link squeezed between the deep seaport and the Thailand-Myanmar border; and third, the villagers whose homes will be flooded by the dam reservoir.
Five villages in Nabule area in Yebyu Township are the first group to be relocated to make way for the sea-port and industrial estate. Understandably, they are anxious about losing their ancestral homes and farmlands. Villagers have already reported negative impacts to their livelihoods since the Project was initiated.

Seasonal farming in Nabule has been constrained. Project officials have ordered villagers to grow their crops elsewhere. The village road has been damaged from excessive use by the Company’s industrial vehicles, thereby depriving villagers of the use of the road during the wet season and creating dusty environmental conditions in the dry season.

The situation is worse at Paradut village where ongoing rock quarrying provides construction materials. Villagers have complained about the Company clearing their cashew plantations and blasting mountains in the watershed area. They are concerned that if the watershed is negatively affected, their source of water for household consumption and agricultural irrigation will be destroyed.

Ms. San Kyi from Mudu village said that villagers are distressed about the unresolved resettlement and compensation issues. Furthermore villagers were astonished by the Company’s recent announcement that resettlement is almost complete. Contrary to this statement, she commented, “None has really moved out”.

“We don’t want to move, but don’t know what to do. For lands that we own, not all will be compensated as they (the company) said they would not pay for lands un-utilized. Many worry about their new home (settlement site) they have yet to resettle in and what to do for living since farmlands won’t be provided. Mostly villagers don’t know anything about the Project, but would like to know what they can do so that they won’t have to move”.
In Kamuangthwe community where the road-link connects to Thailand, conflicts have occasionally erupted because ethnic Karen residents are disillusioned with the Company’s actions.

The Company constructed sections of the road through established farmlands, damaging crops in the process, without the villagers’ consent. The villagers subsequently blockaded the road and prohibited the company from entering their property. Later, a Team from the Environmental Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University arrived to study the environmental impact of the road-link. A community meeting was organized (in March 2012) with representation from the company in attendance. However, during the meeting the Team reportedly met with the villagers on behalf of the Company and failed to clarify critical issues such as compensation for damage to lands and crops. But the villagers distrusted the impartiality of the team hired by the Company and walked out.

Essentially, the villagers regarded the approach taken by the ITD and the Team, specifically, carrying out studies after construction had begun and properties were already damaged, as a clear demonstration of their ‘lack of ethics’.

At Kalonehtar village, the planned construction of a dam to supply water for the industrial estate has caused tension and uncertainty. The homes and farmlands of more than one thousand villagers will be submerged. The villagers are experiencing psychological suffering and are dissatisfied with the ITD’s resettlement plan.

Villagers are concerned about the construction quality of the proposed resettlement houses after the roof on one house was damaged by a strong wind. Photo credit: Dawei Development Association (DDA)
On 10 November 2012, the affected villagers greeted the Company staff responsible for negotiating the resettlement with signs stating: ‘No Dam’ and ‘No Relocation’.

Kalonehtar villagers greeted the project official with ‘No Dam’ and ‘No Relocation’ signs. Photo credit: Dawei Development Association (DDA)

In early December 2012, the Myanmar government held a public forum in Dawei. Attendants numbered around 300, comprising, on one side, representatives of potentially affected community groups and civil society activists, and on the other, the Deputy Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, the Chief Minister of Tanintharyi Region and representatives of the Company. Reportedly, the latter turned out to be defensive while the former urged a ‘Project rethink’ and to develop alternatives that do not harm the environment and local livelihoods.

“We don’t want to create trouble to the government’s economic development. We are just asking the government to review the planned dam in the Kalonehtar area. We earn our living from agriculture. If the dam is built; all our farmlands, plantations, natural environment and rare wildlife will vanish”, U Ka Myint from Kalonehtar village said to Karen News.

Kalonehtar villagers released the ‘No Dam’ balloon during the full moon festival in November 2012. Photo credit: Dawei Development Association (DDA)

U Soe Win from Htain Gyi village also raised a question that remains unanswered. “In my village many people do not want to relocate. They asked me to come here and ask the authorities if they do not move out, will the government arrest them? We want to know if there are any laws
that authorize the government to arrest us on a charge of relocation refusal."

The Government of Myanmar now faces escalating local resistance to the project to which participants including the Thai Government, the Company, and potential project financiers should not ignore.

There is no doubt that the winds of change are blowing over Dawei. Is the sky clear or are there dark clouds on the horizon? Probably, one has to stand on the ground in Dawei and observe it. The least (Thai) society can do is listen to the legitimate voice of those who have lived their lives on the land for generations—they know from experience that even a single cloud on the horizon can be a sign that a potentially dangerous storm is coming.

Environmental experts and civil society activists in Thailand question the legitimacy of the government’s decision that will lead to spending public resources to patronize a private project, while fostering investment in creating a highly polluting industrial park ten times the size of Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate in Rayong Province.

How can the Royal Thai government ... regardless it’s brand X or brand Y in power ... be regarded as anything other than as a vicious force for evil? The despoiler of the earth’s natural and human communities? Working against the interests of the Land and of the People? The opposite of what’s advertised?

Why should the people ... the Thai people and the Burmese people ... pub up with these brutal brigands any longer?