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Climate Change in  
the Mekong

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**Rethinking**  
Development Studies  
in Southeast Asia:  
State of Knowledge and Challenges

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# Rethinking Development Studies in Southeast Asia: State of Knowledge and Challenges

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# Innovation for Inclusive Development:

A Design Thinking Approach to MA-  
level Internships

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## Introduction

In Southeast Asia, despite general trends of rising human development, economic growth and dropping proportions of people living in extreme poverty, inequality is rising and for those at the base of the pyramid poverty appears to remain entrenched (ADB, 2012). New ways of thinking about and tackling poverty are needed (iBoP Asia Project, 2012). One approach that has been proposed is Innovation for Inclusive Development (IID), which has been defined as "innovation that reduces poverty and enables all groups of people, especially the poor and marginalized, to participate in decision making, create and actualize opportunities, and equitably share in the benefits of development" (IDRC, 2013:5).

In this paper, I briefly map out approaches towards and the relationship between inclusiveness, innovation and development. I then introduce a new Master-level module titled "Principles, Tools and Practices for Innovation for Inclusive Development (IID) in Southeast Asia" taught on the MA in International Development Studies Program, Chulalongkorn University since 2015, and offer some reflections on its implementation to date.

## Conceptualizing Inclusiveness and Innovation

Exclusion—and its inverse, inclusion—is a recurring concern of development studies. People may be excluded from many things, including: a livelihood; property, credit, or land; housing; minimal or prevailing consumption levels; education, skills, and cultural capital; citizenship and legal equality; democratic participation; and humanity, respect, fulfilment and understanding (Silver, 1995). Social exclusion occurs for many reasons, including: market social, policy and political structural barriers.

Inclusive growth has become increasingly discussed in the context of ever-expanding and deepening global capitalism. In the sphere of regional inter-governmental policy-making in Southeast Asia, for example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has set as a goal the need for inclusive growth within its process of regional economic integration (ASEAN, 2011), although in practice this appears ambitious and unlikely to be attained.

Conceptually, inclusive growth may be defined as "such growth as improvements in the social and economic wellbeing of

communities [occur] that have structurally been denied access to resources, capabilities, and opportunities." In this sense, it is both a process and an outcome, and is framed by Amartya Sen's conceptualization of poverty that it is not just a lack of income, but in fact a lack of capabilities (Sen, 1999). Sen offers an "agent-oriented view on development and inequality" (Hartman, 2012), reasoning that as the marginalized acquire more capabilities and as unfreedoms are removed, they may be able to take advantage of economic and social opportunities. Thus, Sen re-conceptualizes development as the expansion of peoples' capabilities, in other words their ability to do things that they have reason to value.

Innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas. These may include: new ideas related to services, processes, institutions, business models, or supply chains; and can be entirely new inventions or novel re-combinations or new to the context. Innovation may be technological, social or political. In fact, they are inter-linked as, for example, technological innovation entails reorganizing social relations around a new technology and political agreements on its use and disbursement. In a business sense, innovation is often interpreted as generating commercial value. From the perspective of IID, however, innovations relate not only to creating material wealth (or reducing material poverty), but social or political innovations that expand people's capabilities.

Related to innovation, Governments in many countries of Southeast Asia nowadays have science, technology and innovation (STI) policies and management strategies (Ratanawaraha et al, 2013). Many of these policies have been critiqued, however, as: being supply-side led, with an

emphasis on university and research institution production of knowledge; being fragmented from the production structure of the economy; and receiving little investment and with limited numbers of skilled engineers and R&D scientists (Wong, 2011).

Furthermore, from the perspective of inclusive development these national innovation systems are principally for business-orientated innovation aimed

*National innovation systems are business-oriented to the formal sector and national economic growth. They do not address innovation by marginalized communities in the context of an informal economy.*

towards the formal sector and national economic growth. They do not address innovation for and by marginalized communities, their situational or community knowledge, and the context of a predominantly informal economy. In the worst case, such national innovation could even further marginalize these communities. Thus we should ask a number of questions towards innovation policies, including (adapted from Paunov, 2013):

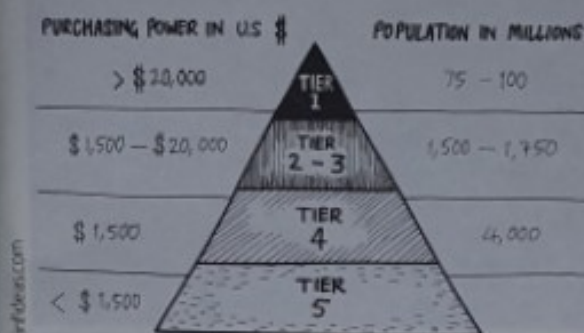
Do policies aimed at supporting innovation reward only those with access to resources?



Does innovation and the resulting technological/ social change lead to increased inequalities?

To what extent can innovation be mobilised to improve the life conditions of the lower income groups ("inclusive innovation")?

### Approaches Towards IID



Some have proposed that the demographic at the "base of the pyramid" is a huge marketing opportunity, if only it can be reached. They propose new or redesigned products, and new marketing and distribution methods. Those in favor of such an approach argue that they provide reduced costs for higher quality products/ services, and provide jobs within the communities. In term of consumer goods, a well-known example is Nestle's "Popularly Positioned Products," (PPPs) which range from chocolate bars to nutritionally enhanced dried milk.

Not everyone consider PPPs as beneficial however. According to GRAIN (2012) these products use cheap ingredients and are marketed to entice people away from locally-sourced produce (such as fresh milk), with impact on local economies and infringements on food sovereignty. Shahzad et al (2012), meanwhile, points out that for marginalized communities,

their social capital is an important asset for community resilience, yet as BoP businesses enter into such marginalized communities this social capital can become diminished even as material poverty reduces. Thus, even when "income" increases, poverty in Sen's sense of the concept may not reduce.

Others have emphasized the role of appropriate technology. E.F. Schumacher, in his book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* argued that high-income economies innovated to produce capital-intensive goods, but that these were inappropriate for low-income countries. Schumacher called for intermediate technologies, operating at smaller scales and that minimally disturbed natural systems. This call was mainly taken up by NGOs within the "Appropriate Technology" movement in the 1970s, which subsequently evolved into the "Practical Action" movement.

More recently, Kaplinsky (2009), in a paper titled *Schumacher meets Schumpeter: Appropriate Technology Below The Radar*, argues that capabilities for innovation are spreading globally, with implications for the products that are produced - including displacing Northern exported products, for example cheaper engines and rice mills. He writes: "The very large size of China and India, coupled with their growing technological capabilities and the rapid growth of low-incomes, makes it likely that they will become the dominant sources of innovation for the poor."

Finally, a different approach has emphasized "Grassroots innovation" which is community-led. These are solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. They empower, and often seek to create new social institutions and systems



of provision based upon different values to those of the mainstream. Examples include: community energy projects; complementary currencies, such as time banks; local (organic) food production; and low-impact eco-housing (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). They can offer promising new ideas and practices, but may struggle to scale up and spread beyond small niches (Fressoli et al, 2014).

#### Teaching Innovation for Inclusive Development

MAIDS introduced the new module "Principles, Tools and Practices for Innovation for Inclusive Development (IID) in Southeast Asia" for its 2014-2015 course. Given that IID should be inclusive in both outcome and process, and that when IID is catalyzed by intermediaries such as civil society groups or research institutes problems should be co-diagnosed, and solutions co-designed, and co-deployed, the course intended

to introduce new pedagogic methods for teaching "design thinking" and "co-production of knowledge." The specific objectives of the course were to: problematize and encourage critical thinking on IID; equip students with the skills and techniques to be able to work with communities in utilizing the tools of IID; and foster students' passion for working with communities, and link the concepts of IID to its practice.

Five three-hour classes are allocated to teaching theories of IID. These classes: link macro processes of international development to micro-processes of the household; define and understand the situation at the "base of the pyramid"; focus on processes of inclusion and exclusion from the perspective of market, technology and social systems; and explore processes of technological, social, and political innovation. Practical approaches and tools for IID and design thinking are also taught, including situational analysis, problem analysis,



solution analysis, and innovation project design (IDEO, 2011).

The praxis component of the course entails a 100 hour mentored internship with a local organization. Working in a team or individually, the student is asked to move through a design thinking process of co-diagnosis of problem and co-design of a solution. This contributes ultimately towards the organization's co-delivery and co-deployment with local communities. Thus, the course adopts an experiential learning approach, supporting the development of necessary skills including of facilitation, observation, communication, and relationship-building. At the end of the internship the students present their findings back to the host organization and community groups, together with the course lecturers.

In the first year of the program, one student undertook an internship with Raitong Organics Farm, where he co-designed and piloted survey tools for the participatory certification of organic food production. The app developed enables farm-level data to be collected via a smartphone, stores the data in an online database, and ultimately will enable food consumers to view where

their food has been sourced from and the processes behind its production. It is intended that consumers also be involved in the certification process thus linking production to consumption, and that ultimately the peer-to-peer certification scheme will be available to all interested organic farmers in Thailand.

Four other students have undertaken an internship with the "HomeNet" Foundation for Labour and Employment Promotion. Three students have worked with HomeNet and its partners, including Bronze Craft and Dignity Returns, to help develop a strategy to promote the manufactured products of these organizations whilst also raising the profile of the issue of labor rights through these manufactured goods. They also organized a "Demo Day" for Bronze Craft to help the community-based organization prepare for the opening of their visitor's center in late 2015. The fourth student has supported HomeNet's work with Myanmar domestic workers in Bangkok, with a focus on access to health care. In particular, she researched and prepared case studies on the barriers to accessing health insurance.

In each case, the students approached their internship with an open mind to the project that they would undertake. They discussed with their host organization and explored various challenges faced, and considered how their knowledge or skills might contribute towards a solution. Once the problem was understood, a project was co-designed to be manageable within the timeframe of the internship. The mentored internship approach adopting principles of design thinking produced a fruitful engagement for both the host organization and the student.



Raitong Farm

*“A mentored internship approach adopting principles of design thinking produced fruitful engagement for both the host organization and the student.”*

#### Conclusion: Towards Co-produced Knowledge

According to Dr. Segundo Joaquin Romero, Jr., co-lecturer on the MAIDS course for 2014-15, “inclusive innovation’ is innovation by and with the poor, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, and the marginalized.” In teaching and practicing IID, the crux of the challenge is that power inequalities presently exist in the creation and deployment of knowledge, even when intended for poverty reduction. Therefore, to redress this situation any course that seeks to teach IID must co-create knowledge between university lecturers, students, other intermediary organizations, and the communities themselves, and remain sensitive to these power inequalities.

The experience of the MAIDS program in teaching IID affirms that design thinking when complimented with broader development studies theory can equip students with pragmatic and creative approaches to development challenges and poverty reduction. More broadly, IID has the potential to be a national and regional policy framework and research agenda, as well as a community strategy at the grassroots level.

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