



CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

To many people around the world, everyday life is a struggle to survive. Often, the world's most vulnerable people face the biggest threats, whether it is malnutrition, unemployment, prosecution or even death. As a result, national governments have initiated laws that aim to protect the most vulnerable in their society. For various reasons, these laws are often insufficient by nature, or poorly implemented and enforced. Therefore, many people are left on their own in their struggle for better living conditions.

Protecting and improving human health is a vital aspect of human security. The downward spiral of bad health, unemployment, violence, leading to even poorer health conditions is well-known. Good health is a basic element of life, because good health is a pre-condition for people to achieve their full potential. The health impact assessment (HIA) is a mechanism that aims to improve healthy policy-making by involving individual citizens in the process of designing healthy public policy. By decentralization and empowerment of the individual, good health becomes a responsibility of everyone.

Ultimately, this research investigated to what extent health impact assessment mechanisms contribute to better health policies in the real world. We asked the question whether people truly benefit from these health-improving mechanisms, or whether these were merely creating a false sense of democracy. Does public participation really benefit the HIA process, or are the final HIA decisions still made top-down? And if the HIA process is participatory, what are the process' success factors? This chapter will answer the main questions raised at the beginning of this research.

The research was able to draw a number of conclusions regarding the effectiveness of HIA in Thailand, based on the field research that was conducted in Na Nong Bong, Loei Province, where a community HIA had recently been conducted. The following is an overview of the research' most important conclusions:

- ✓ The primary tangible outcome of the community HIA is an increase in knowledge on health issues. However, the benefits of the process with regard to the increase in knowledge may be overestimated, as this knowledge is often already inside the community, and just “awakened” by the community HIA process.
- ✓ The community HIA process in itself does not guarantee that public values and opinions are incorporated in decision-making. Rather, an additional amount of outside political will is needed, since the community HIA has no legally binding characteristics. This should be perceived as an important shortcoming to the process.
- ✓ The community HIA process is found to have no impact on levels of trust between the affected community and the outside stakeholders (incl. local government and company). In addition, the mechanism does not reduce the potential or existing conflict between the community and its stakeholders.
- ✓ In Na Nong Bong, the overall impact of the community HIA outside the community is seriously hampered by the high levels of cooperation between the mine operating company and the local provincial government. Although a case study research cannot generalize this specific effect to HIA on the national level, there seem to be abundant examples in Thailand of “hidden resistance from above” against community initiatives, indicating that community HIAs elsewhere could be obstructed as well.
- ✓ “External” aspects affecting the community HIA process are equally important success factors to the outcome and impact of the process. These factors include the level of unity within the community, the community’s ability to design its strategy and goals, its ability to create a network in which it gains awareness for its issues, its capability to involve various forms of media to increase this awareness, and finally, the community’s ability and willingness to become politically involved.

- ✓ As a result of the adopted co-evolutionary approach to HIA in Thailand, HIAs are conducted at various levels, initiated by different organizations, and therefore difficult to compare. The community HIA that was investigated differs in many ways from the HIA at project level, most importantly in the amount of stakeholders it involves in the process, and the difference in terms of legal impact.

At the start of this research, several issues were identified needing closer examination, such as the process and impact of community participation on the final HIA result. Therefore, the following research question was asked:

“What is the effectiveness of public participation under HIA in Thailand, and how does this shape the overall effectiveness of HIA in Thailand?”

Research findings suggested that, by nature, the community HIA incorporates high levels of public participation, as this type of HIA is initiated and conducted by the community itself. Based on the results from the community HIA in Na Nong Bong, we found that villagers’ knowledge of relevant health issues is clearly increased by the community HIA process. However, as the community HIA process has no legal power to implement the recommendations put forward by the community, the impact of community HIA outside its scope of influence is limited. A failure to enforce these recommendations is a serious limitation of the community HIA process, as demonstrates the system’s inability to correctly enforce the democratic values underpinning the HIA mechanism.

Therefore, we strongly suggest that a HIA *at project level* should immediately follow-up the community HIA, in order to make full use of the knowledge acquired by the community, and increase the impact of the community HIA through the legally binding HIA mechanism at project level. Without a clear and thorough follow-up, the HIA mechanism fails to deliver its promises on democracy, equity and collaboration.

In addition to looking at the overall effectiveness of the HIA mechanism, the research examined the process success factors that positively impact the HIA, by asking the question:

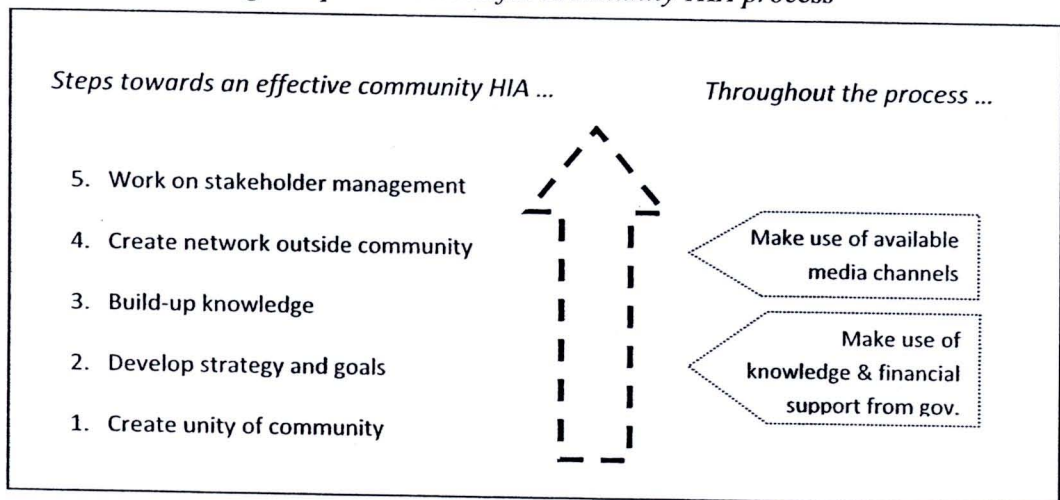
“What are the success factors of a community HIA process according to the local community?”

and,

“Which lessons can be learned from the community HIA examined, that allow other health-affected communities in Thailand to benefit from their experience?”

The inductive research that assessed the success factors identified several “external” factors that were important to the process’ success. These steps are presented in Figure 5.1

Figure 5.1: Strategic steps in a successful community HIA process



Overall, we believe that the HIA mechanism can lead to major improvements to the health of individuals if it succeeds in bringing not only knowledge and empowerment to communities, but also manages to bring changes to the current top-down political decision-making. As the “Triangle That Moves the Mountain” suggest, the full potential of HIA can only be truly utilized when knowledge build-up, social movement and political will all come together.

5.2 Recommendations

This section identifies several recommendations to improve the actual process and outcome of the HIA. In addition, topics for future research are proposed based on the findings of this research.

5.2.1 Recommendations to the community HIA process

- ✓ *Make the political process more transparent.* The community HIA has delivered some tangible objectives, such as the increase in health-related knowledge. However, the way to proceed from here is unclear to the community, since the local government hasn't set out any concrete process to follow-up the community HIA. In order to give the community a fair chance, the political process that follows should be made more transparent.
- ✓ *Follow-up community HIA with HIA at project level.* Linked to previous argument, the road on which to proceed from here is unclear or inexistent. Therefore, we suggest that the HIA at project level should succeed the community HIA process, in order for the community to make use of their knowledge.
- ✓ *Develop general database that combines the available information.* The universities found to be involved in the case of Na Nong Bong haven't until now provide the necessary "uniting ground" that would enable all parties to set the first step towards solving the conflict. Agreeing on the evidence and facts available would facilitate this process, and universities should take the initiative in this phase. Pooling the available data into a common database would be a important first step towards that.
- ✓ *Form an objective third party to facilitate the disentanglement of the conflict.* In the case of Na Nong Bong, all stakeholders have been labeled to be part of the "pro-village" or "against-the-village" camp. This means that no stakeholder is perceived to be neutral within the conflict. Creating such a party would allow the conflict to progress in the right direction.

- ✓ *Involve the company at one point of the community HIA process.* Involving other stakeholders into the community HIA process is not part of the community HIA at any point in the process. Although there are comprehensible arguments to support this stance, at the same time it limits the actual impact of the community HIA process. We therefore argue that, opposed to the wish of the Na Nong Bong village, the mine operating company should be involved at some stage of the community HIA process.

And finally,

- ✓ *Use the experience from other communities on how to organize.* The research illustrated that external factors facilitate the community HIA process to a large extent, and positively affect the impact of the community HIA outcome. Communities conducting the community HIA process in the future should make use of the lessons-learned in Na Nong Bong, as the community' way of organizing determines to a large extent the effectiveness of the HIA outcome.

5.2.2 Recommendations for future research

In order to improve the effectiveness of the HIA program in Thailand, future research should:

- ✓ Examine the effectiveness of public participation under HIA in the case of an HIA conducted at *project level* or *policy level*. The amount of public participation in these types of HIA can be more clearly distinguished, compared to those HIAs conducted at community level. Using the same research framework of five social goals used in the current research, the effect of public participation on levels of trust, amount of conflict and inclusion of public values into decision-making can be measured.
- ✓ Examine the effectiveness of public participation using the current research framework in other sectors where the community HIA was conducted. Cases

where the type of stakeholders differs significantly from the current research (for example in the case of pesticide use in orange farming) should be particularly interesting.

- ✓ Combine theories of social movements with HIA theories, in order to test the effectiveness-increase of the community HIA process depending on the level of community organization. As a matter of fact, there is an opportunity to learn from the organization of social movements on how to better mobilize the community. This could significantly benefit the outcome of a community HIA.

5.3 Limitations

All research has its limitations. Here is a list of the most significant limitations of this research:

- ✓ *Language barrier.* Despite the good translator that was available, it cannot be excluded that valuable information was hidden in the details and lost in translation.
- ✓ *Time limit.* Field research projects that aim to examine the effects of a certain program within a community should normally allocate a considerable amount of time to gain the trust of the villagers. The current field research was conducted in less than three weeks, and therefore does not contain the in-depth views that become available when the period of field research is significantly extended.
- ✓ *Width of information.* Mainly as a result of the time constraints of the field research, only the official village representatives were interviewed. Consequently, this research does not contain the view of other villagers, which may possibly disagree with some of the findings, or articulate even stronger opinions. Similarly, only villagers of Na Nong Bong Noi were interviewed for

the purpose of this research, leaving the views of the inhabitants of Na Nong Bong Yai undiscussed.

- ✓ *Underlying lack of trust towards outsiders.* Given the previous negative experiences with outside researchers that visited Na Nong Bong, a certain amount of self-censuring may have taken place to avoid negative future consequences, although the researcher is generally confident that the views expressed in this thesis reflect the genuine thoughts of the interviewees.

5.4 Closing statement

Globalization, far from being simply an economic phenomenon, has affected human health in various ways. The benefits of economic growth have made us sacrifice our environmental and human resources on a great scale. In our world where natural resources are limited and technological and population growth compete alongside, there is a strong need to better balance the benefits and burden of development. While many adverse factors of economic development are still being passed on to the majority of poor people, there is a growing understanding that human beings are strongly connected and that their faith in the long-term is interconnected even so.

The need for economic, social and environmental sustainability is apparent in several ways. Consumers are becoming more aware of what products they purchase, individuals and consumer groups force companies all over the world to reconsider their production methods, and we slowly but surely start to understand the human impact of our actions on the environment and wildlife. As societies develop, freedom, education and health for all have become basic rights that no one should be excluded from. Beyond a doubt, reaching adequate levels of physical, mental and spiritual health is a major goal of development. But the availability of health is still unevenly divided across the globe and, not least importantly, strongly dependent upon one's financial capabilities. While power held for centuries by elites and bourgeoisie now gradually shifts towards democratically elected governments around the world, these governments are under increasing pressure from businesses to create a climate

primarily focused on economic growth. Capitalism, in its current form, is at risk of overshooting its original promises of bringing economic growth, prosperity and ultimately happiness to the people it serves. How else can we justify the gain of gold for the lucky few at the expense of the health of so many?

Capitalism has brought us many positive things throughout the last century, but recent experiences have undoubtedly demonstrated that there is no actual *captain on the ship*. Markets, it has become painfully clear, do not possess the self-regulatory capacity many claimed it had. As a result, we need to turn again to our human capacity for creating security, well-being and happiness. Moving beyond ignorance, governments and citizens have the duty to work together and create development that makes sense for everyone.

Human security emphasizes the importance of the individual in safeguarding its own security. The individual, rather than the state, knows what's best for him. Proponents of the human security paradigm emphasize that development of countries and regions simply cannot take place unless security at the individual level is guaranteed. The concept of Health Impact Assessment underlines the belief that the individual should again be at the centre of our decision-making, both to safeguard its security and to achieve well-being. The fundamental beliefs behind the HIA demonstrate that sustainable economic development cannot take place in an environment of exploitation in which the costs of development are taken by those who benefit least. As such, it is a mechanism that tackles our common understanding that poor people should pay the price of development.

Unfortunately, executing HIAs requires strong support from governments in terms of law enforcement, as communities in general have little chance of winning against corporations when fighting alone. The notion of empowerment, covering a vast landscape of meanings, interpretations and definitions, should be understood as the strengthening of social, economic and political capabilities of individuals and communities. These capabilities include not only the build-up of knowledge but also the mastering of skills that are needed to put the knowledge into practice. It is this whole set of skills that we need to provide to those who need it. Otherwise, empowerment remains a beautiful, yet empty box of promises and good intentions.

To include legislation on HIA in the Constitution is beyond any doubt a change for the better, yet it also assigns a number of fundamental responsibilities to the government. Not only does it expect governments to facilitate the empowerment exercises at the grassroots level, it also imposes the moral obligation of correctly implementing and executing these laws to serve the people it was chosen to represent. This synthesis approach, in which bottom-up and top-down forces work towards a common goal can only bring real change if top-down actions and willingness to implement the law truly exists.

Failing to correctly implement the HIA mechanism means we fail to understand the interconnection between human beings. It means we fail to equally share the benefits of economic growth, improved health or education. It shows that we still fail to see the bigger picture of human security, development or global peace.

Can we hide behind ignorance forever?