

General Comments (mostly drawn from Executive Summary)

- The paper seems rather over-optimistic about the historical trajectory of cash crop development in NE Thailand and tends to gloss over some of the serious negative social and environmental impacts precipitated by cash crop development, some of which are alluded to or mentioned in Chapter 6, but are absent in the Ex Summary
- Tends to ignore the likelihood that the majority of the wealth that has been created and has helped lift rural dwellers out of poverty has been created by off-farm employment and income; and not the on-farm activities implied by the authors. Poverty reduction can only partly be ascribed to the growth of cash crops. NE Thailand has been undergoing a fundamental agrarian transition for several decades (good literature by Jonathan Rigg).
- Emigration and not "immigration" (p.47) has long been the defining feature of NE Thailand for most of the past 5 decades. Many rural villagers have become virtual "ghost villages" due to the out-migration of the economically active section of the community, leaving just old people and children behind. However, this is poorly recognized in official statistics due to the way that domicile is recorded in Thailand.
- To describe NE Thailand's experiment in massive expansion of export-oriented cash crops as a "success story" is to present a rather one-sided/biased version of the story. The authors refer twice to the "Siamese Tragedy" book by Bello et al (1998) - but perhaps have not read what it says about the NE Thai cash crop experience.
- The summary refers to "smallholder-led commercialization strategy pioneered by Thailand"; but this misrepresents the fact that the commercialization strategy was almost entirely state-led, with strong support from the export-oriented private sector that really reaped the benefits from this policy. The farmers themselves, beyond being labour and landholders, were largely passive participants in the policies and strategies designed in Bangkok and abroad which so fundamentally affected their livelihoods and environment, making them highly dependent on distant and fickle markets for their income, causing many to lose their land and contribute to the rural-urban drift that characterizes the region.
- The paper tends to ignore the strong ideological and political drivers of agricultural intensification in general and irrigation development in particular. It also paints an overly simplistic and rosy picture concerning the long struggles for land rights by villagers in the Northeast, and the heavy price paid in achieving some measure of security.
- One might reasonably ask, does GSZ have the equivalent of a Bangkok or overseas job markets to provide jobs and income in the industrial and service sectors to underwrite the rural-agricultural sector, as Northeast Thailand had?

Comments specifically on the short section on irrigation in Thailand (p.118)

- The section ignores the fact that a lot of the irrigation investment in the 1960s to 80s period was the result of foreign aid and loan packages from various donors (e.g. USAID and EU) for strategic purposes (e.g. anti-communist propaganda purposes) and not directly by the Thai gov't's domestic budget alone.
- The RID may have launched a "small-scale water resources development project" in 1977 and may have tried handing over facilities to "subdistrict councils for O & M", but there is scant evidence any projects were adopted by the councils up to the present, who were very weak in the 1970 -90s period and still have little budget or experience in managing such infrastructure, even if they had the will or desire to. Hence, the reality is most such facilities still rely on the occasional and piecemeal financial support of RID for nearly most O & M activities.
- The statement: "Irrigation is much less important to producers of cassava and sugarcane, which explains why irrigation development was not a major driver of the NE region's export success" suggests that the authors have a rather poor understanding of the on-the-ground reality in NE Thailand. To the best of my knowledge, there is no cassava or sugar cane under irrigation at present in NE Thailand (unless on a limited scale in experimental stations).
- Report fails to mention strong gov't & donor support (i.e. generous subsidies) for agribusiness growth and concentrating on export-oriented vegetable and seed prodn, during the 1980s and early 90s, much of which contracted after the 1997 Asian Economic Crash, which saw many such businesses fail (e.g. tomato canning in Nam Songkhram Basin).
- State-sponsored irrigation has probably helped less than 10 % of the total NE households economically (while displacing many tens of thousands from reservoir areas) by the simple expedient that most communities lie outside irrigated areas. Therefore, it stands to reason that the economic contribution of irrigation has been generally limited and indeed many donors agreed that the IRR of most systems was poor. At the same time, many small and medium sized irrigation projects have failed outright over the years, especially the poorly conceived pumped irrigation schemes.
- Overall, the report gives sparse information on the highly controversial and contested nature of irrigation development in the region (Northeast and wider Mekong), which is the subject of growing critiques in recent years (see various Molle and Floch papers or Molle et al's (2009) "Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Basin" for further pointers).

Notes on Cerrado Brazil for Bruce Lankford concerning the document “Awakening Africa’s Sleeping Giant” – 17 June 2010

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General Comments

We focused our analysis mainly on the Brazilian parts of the document.

To assist “Commercial Agriculture “ in the way it has dominantly been practiced in the world, it can be said that the World Bank document is a good one.

The presented analysis for the Brazilian Cerrado (occupation history, current situation, etc.) is coherent and, we assume, non-biased. Perhaps, what is biased are the purposes of “Commercial Agriculture”.

According to our point of view, the main aspects which support the Brazilian Cerrado as a “case of success” (within the scope of current “Commercial Agriculture”) are:

- correction of soil fertility, and improvement of soil management and of crop varieties through research assistance (EMBRAPA); and
- “becoming competitive” in the global agriculture market.

The World Bank document gives good insights about a number of important negative impacting points (social, environmental, economical, political, etc.) resulting from the model of “Commercial Agriculture” developed in the Cerrado region.

Hence, reduction of concentration of wealth and power could be one of the main challenges in the implementation of “Commercial Agriculture in the Guinea Savannah Zone and Beyond”. In this sense, the Brazilian case is far from being considered a “case of success” - in the way we thought ‘development’ should be done!

Comments specifically on irrigation in Cerrado region

First of all, we shall answer your questions:

=> *“is irrigation in the Cerrado region commonplace? Does it use centre-pivot?”*

Yes, irrigation is widely adopted. As mentioned in the document, Cerrado’s agriculture is based on agribusiness, large-scale farms and mechanization. Hence, due to those issues and Cerrado’s flat lands, centre-pivot is the most adopted irrigation technique.

=> *“does it use groundwater?”*

Yes, but not very often. Surface water is the main source, mainly with the use of dams.

You might remember, in my presentations I’ve showed the irrigation issue in Cerrado region – huge centre-pivots and dams. I’ve been there for the “1st National Seminar on Irrigated Agriculture and Sustainable Development” and what is described in the Sleeping Giant report is correct.

The potential area for irrigation expansion in Brazil is 29 million hectares. Currently, the irrigated area is about 3 million. Most of the aforementioned expansion area is supposed to be in Cerrado region, which is a very fragile ecosystem. In the same seminar I noticed that this number is pushed as a number to be fully reached. It seems to us that the bigger the potential irrigated area to be expanded the easier will be the “selling” of the idea that it should be fully utilised. This can also be applied to the SSA, as you presented in one of your seminars in DEV.

Another point we would like to call your attention refers to the following citation in the World Bank document: “Most of the irrigation in the region ... involves small-scale pumping operations”: “Small-scale pumping” in the Cerrado region may represent “large-scale pumping” in the SSA case.

Final remarks

As you will notice, our contribution seems to be more optimistic than the one given by David. Differently from what has been pointed out by him, we think that the World Bank document expressed pretty well the reality of the “Commercial Agriculture” in the Brazilian Cerrado, with a well balanced presentation of both positive and negative related aspects.

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