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**THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY CURRENCY SYSTEMS ON GENDER
RELATIONS IN RURAL NORTHEAST THAILAND: A HYBRID SOCIAL
AUDIT – GENDER ANALYSIS APPROACH**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an initial response to calls for an investigation of the impact of Community Currency Systems (CCSs) on gender relations in a developing country context. It thereby proposes the question of whether or not CCSs support existing gender relations or transform them. The proposition is that the unique characteristics of a localised currency may influence a variety of economic and social characteristics in rural communities to the point where they affect the wellbeing of men and women differently. In conclusion, the research offers three learning points; firstly, the use of Seyfang's (1997) Social Audit Approach together with gender analysis frameworks do offer a viable means of generating primary information; secondly, the two study areas show that the most obvious effect of the CCS on gender relations regards the strengthening of women's social capital; thirdly, that the implementation of a CCS can positively influence gender relations in other areas and should be more fully investigated.

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INTRODUCTION

Discrimination against women is one of the most singularly pervasive form of social exclusion as well as a major barrier to poverty reduction (DFID 2001). It is therefore a wonder that with the exceptional recent global expansion of Community Currency Systems (CCSs) that are celebrated in their social and economic benefits to 'the local' (Pacione 1997a, 1997b), that the nexus of CCSs, Development and Gender has not been more eagerly investigated. Indeed, Seyfang (2001) notes that no empirical analysis of the gendered impacts of note-based CCSs has been conducted in any country. This situation has prevented discussions and implications for women and/or gender relations in these contexts. Moreover, with Puntasen et. al. (2002) calling for the identification of the social impacts of Thai CCSs at a local level, this paper acts as an initial response to a void both in community currency research as well as wider international development discourse.

In its most simplistic form, this paper can be likened to an analysis of the intersecting area of three spheres of study in and out of the context of Northeast Thailand: CCSs, Gender and Development (Figure 1). More specifically, the overarching question is whether CCSs can in effect be neutral towards, supportive of, or positively transformative towards existing gender relations. These three distinctions are based on the work of Kabeer (1994, 1996) who distinguishes between gender-neutral policies, which fail to take into account the different practical needs of men and women; gender-specific policies, which do take into account these different practical needs (while however working within existing gendered division of resources and responsibilities); and gender-redistributive policies, which intend to transform the division of resources and responsibilities according to both the practical and strategic needs of individuals.

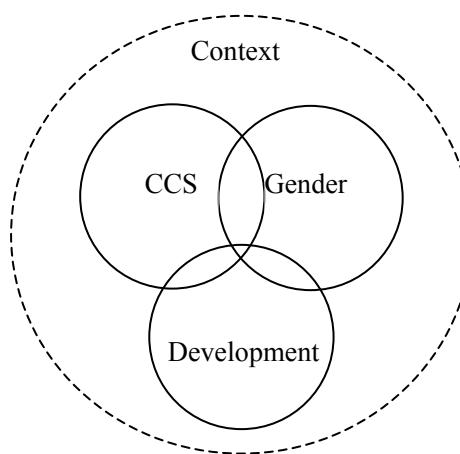


Figure 1: Conceptual overview of research agenda

A second outcome of this paper is the opportunity to witness and to take into account the issues that arise during the implementation of a CCS-friendly 'Social Audit Approach', as espoused by Seyfang (1997), in a developing country context with a heavy gender analysis component. Consequently, there are learning opportunities for those interested in developing methodologies for obtaining field-based evidence on CCSs, social-exclusion, and development practice.

Naturally, context is of critical importance in extracting and transporting applicable lessons, and this paper shall therefore begin with an emphasis on it. A following section, a literature

review, will continue to colour-in context as it relates to the concepts and linkages in figure 1. This review will assist in developing three research questions that will reliably inform the overarching research question. A methodology will then draw upon previous discussions and elucidate the tailored approach required in answering the three research questions. The presentation of findings and analysis from the case studies may then lead to the specific and general implications of the research and finally be related back to the overarching research questions.

REGIONAL AND COUNTRY CONTEXT

Although Thailand has been considered the 'Cinderella of Asia' (FEER 1990) with growth rates of 7.1% and 7.6% between 1970-80 and 1980-1990 respectively (Rigg 2003). The country also suffers significantly from poor income equality with Gini coefficients increasing from 0.417 in 1975 and 0.500 in 1990, to 0.512 in 1996 (Ikemoto & Uehara 2000). Indeed Krongkaew et. al. (1992) contend that in no other country in Southeast Asia has the trade-off between income growth and equality been more pronounced. On top of this, the 1997 economic crises served to compound these characteristics significantly with the incidence of poverty increasing 16.6% between 1996 and 1998 (Paitoonpong 1999). Simultaneously though, Hewison (2000) discusses a flowering of civil society as a consequence of the malaise.

Both CCSs are located in the region of Isan, an area geographically distinct and remote as well as economically and politically marginalised. The area is comparatively arid with ineffective irrigation and worst hit by the rural-urban divide (FEER 1994). It has had the highest incidence of poverty at 36% (Krongkaew 1993) and is politically a 'hardly typical pink zone' (Parnwell 2003:4)¹. Parnwell & Rigg (1996) also note an 'ethnic differential' between the people of Isan, the Thai-Lao or rather Khon Isan, from what are more formally known as the T'ai, Khon Thai or Khon Klaang peoples of Central, North and South Thailand.



Mukdahan province

Yasothon province

There is also the matter of considering the gender unconformities in the study areas (Blumberg 2004) - the region of Isan is home to exceptionally egalitarian gender relations at the level of the 'household' while discounting market and state influences. When discussing the wider ramifications of this research then, it must be maintained that there is a strong and egalitarian collective identity in Isan based on the key point that regionalism and ethnicity coincide. The criteria for the selection of the CCSs in this region are explained in the methodology.

¹ 'Pink- zone' refers to an area often regarded as housing a separatist-communist insurgency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will serve to critically expand on the concepts in figure 1, as well as their interstices. These expansions will accordingly highlight what can be argued to be key considerations that will create a platform on which to build a valid methodology that reliably addresses the general research question.

Community Currency Systems

There is little disagreement in the literature that there are basically three schemas in which community currencies operate (Seyfang & Pearson 2000)². The purpose of this paper is to investigate the dimensions of the ‘local currency’ form of a CCS as it is conceived in the study areas (see Plate 1). This cannot be critically achieved however, without examining the general conceptual logic of schemes that according to Dodd (1994), add weight to attempts to re-evaluate the role of money in contemporary society. This is important because if they are re-evaluating the role of money, they may be renegotiating exchange relations.



Plate 1: The community currency (Boon) of Santisuk village CCS, Yasothon province

In order to satisfy Leyshon & Thrift (1997), any object that is to be nominated as conventional money must embody four concepts; it has to act as a medium of exchange, a unit of account (measure of value), a store of value and a standard of deferred payment. In this activity, it is notable that CCSs prioritise the medium of exchange function over the store of value function. Money in CCSs may consequently be seen as a measure of value and not value itself. The result is that if money is seen purely as information, and not reducible to an

² Mutual Credit Systems, Local currencies and Time Banks/Volunteer Service Credits

interest-earning object, then it need not be scarce. Another re-evaluation is that CCSs are locally defined and managed, that is, endogenous. For instance, DeMeulenaere (2000) explains that CCSs essentially offer a decentralised approach to the issuing and servicing of a currency. They are thus parallel to mainstream currencies but localised through the creation of a third-party administration that records transactions, keeps accounts and gathers/hosts information. A co-product of this exercise is the geographical constraint imparted on the currency.

CCSs and Development

As a result of the aforementioned features, trade (in theory) may thus alter to the effect that the volume, equity and social dimensions of transactions are influenced. Regarding volume and equity, a CCS currency can be highly abundant which may counter the effects of sub-optimal distribution by involving not only those able to supply goods and services to economy, but also those with an over-capacity to do so – such as the time-rich/ money-poor or unemployed (Schrafin 2001, Williams 2000, Williams et. al. 2001). Simultaneously, Salverda & Powell (1999) declare (with an eye towards gender relations) the potential of CCSs to give traditionally undervalued work greater significance by essentially ‘formalising’ it. Trade volume and regional equity may also be increased where, with their fixed spatial base, CCSs lend themselves in encouraging import substitution (Pacione 1999, Puntasen 2002). CCSs understood with this in mind may be seen as being primarily concerned not with economic gain per se, but rather with economic loss. With Leyson & Thrift’s (1996:25) conviction that the likes of Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) are emblematic of a ‘reassertion of premodern moneys’ (with their emphasis on use-value), it is not difficult to conclude that not only may CCS’s have an economic volume and distributive dimension, but an important ‘community’ or value-laden one as well. With these aspects comes a litany of remarks questioning the potential impacts of CCSs on Social Capital and Civil Society. These remarks often resound in applause (Pichpong & Khlangpukhiaw 2002, North 1998, Lee 1996).

On balance however, there are popular and obvious arguments against the above hypotheses. Firstly, an increased volume of trade in a constrained setting may not only replace or encroach upon already existing arrangements of non-participants – threatening their immediate livelihood in a zero-sum game (Seyfang 1997) – but also decrease competition. This can in turn decrease quality and/or variety of goods or services due to the high availability of credit amongst scheme members (Pacione 1999). Entangled with this, CCSs may also be as prone as any membership organisation is to their appropriation by power holders or cliques (Doherty et. al. 1999). The lauded ameliorative effects that robust ‘Social Capital Networks’ and healthy ‘Civil Societies’ have on poverty reduction for instance, cannot easily be argued in the face of an organisation exhibiting ‘the iron law of oligarchy’ (Uphoff 1995). Tandem concerns here are issues of corrosion arising from the process of ‘crowding out’ that lay threadbare informal social arrangements (Morduch 1999).

There is little space to entirely discuss each of these theoretical advantages and disadvantages with the multiple realities of CCSs in practice. It must suffice to say that LETS schemes in particular are only of late being displayed beyond their ‘idealised representations’ (Aldridge & Patterson 2002:371) and that the pros and cons discussed are present in various guises and permutations (*ibid.*). This is true also for the few in-depth studies that examine the Thai Kud Chum CCS (Powell 2002) (Pichpong & Khlangpukhiaw 2002).

So with all of these facets it is not surprising to discover that these schemes have been leapt upon by an array of authors in the global 'North', all espousing different ways of conceptualising and utilising them. As useful as these realizations may be, they may also contrast to how the nexus of CCSs and Development in the global 'South' can be perceived because of the fact that the majority of people suffer from an 'inability to meet their basic needs' (Lopezllera-Mendez & DeMeulenaere 2000:1). The Thai literature is predominantly similar to the readings on LETS however; if only in the sense that it mostly glorifies self-reliance in a national (Pichpongisa 2000) (Khlangpukiaw 2002) and international context (Puntasen et. al. 2002).

Gender and Development

The study of the inter-linkages between Gender and Development can be broken down into *thinking* and *practice*. Both of these areas are frequently, and incorrectly, deflated as a concern primarily focused on the situation of women. More correctly, it is important to realise that not only is gender a social construction that is accordingly fluid and transformable, but also that it constitutes a power relation beyond the sole category of women (Kabeer 1994, Kabeer & Subrahmanian 1996). Moreover, these power relations can be argued to be the product of different institutional sites (household, community, market, state) each exhibiting their own climate of negotiated rules and norms contributing to or preventing the growth of 'well-being' (ibid.). This pattern of *thinking* can be associated with the logic of 'Gender and Development' (GAD) and differs markedly from the feminisms of Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD).

The WID literature focused on the issue of generating access for women to the market in the assumption they would benefit (Boserup 1970), provided their reproductive-productive, or 'double-load' burden was taken into account. The WAD perspective differs in its accusation that it was the development process itself that was alienating women, and not the exclusion from that process (Pearson 2000, Mcilwaine & Datta 2003). Different again, the GAD literature serves to disentangle the residual category of 'women' but has to its detriment a mainstay of 'role' and not 'relations' theory that does not attempt to redefine the interconnections of society on various institutional levels (Kabeer 1994).

In regard to the development of gendered Social Capital, there is little literature. In fact it is only at a recent conference that the relationship of Social Capital to Gender has been problematised³. Nevertheless, thinking on this relationship highlights the formative nature that women, as primary care-givers, have in the early development of social capital (Piccotto 1998). From another standpoint, women's networks have been considered to be more informal (Neuhouser 1995) and function more closely through a familial base while men's networks tend to oscillate around co-workers and formalised groups (Moore 1990).

The confluence of Gender and Development *practice* in Thailand has according to some authors served to marginalise women. Powell (2002) talks of projects prior to the Kud Chum CCS in the Northeast of Thailand that usually had leanings towards being counterproductive. This was explained from the observation that men were dominating access to resources such as information, credit and training. Others prefer to frame the practice of marginalisation in terms of the advances of capitalist modernisation. Whittaker (1999) notes that such transformations have exacerbated women's tenuous economic position in the Northeast (Isan) by benefiting only some while replacing cultural capital with economic capital. More

³ The Gender and Social Capital Conference, University of Manitoba, 2003

generally, Parnwell & Arghiros (1996: 21-2) see on-farm mechanisation as leading to the 'masculinization' of agriculture, a concomitant decline in women's knowledge and status eventually leading to an increased dependency on men.

In contrast, Mee-Udon & Blumberg (2002) and Blumberg (2004) research the particularities of gender stratification in Isan and regard relations as exhibiting 'outlier' qualities compared to global geographies. For instance, the Thai-Lao ethnic group is seen to have 'equality/near-equality' with the caveat that governmental and/or organised religious affairs are suspended.

Gender, CCSs and Development

The literature on the coalescence of these three areas of study is scarce and for the most part, non-specialised. For example, Fitzpatrick & Caldwell (2001) note that their LET scheme had higher proportion of women than men, as do Seyfang (2001a), Pacione (2001) and Williams et. al. (2001). Pichpongisa & Khlangpukhiaw (2002:26) also declare in passing that the Bia currency in Kud Chum district of Thailand has served to 'strengthen the role of women in community development'. Indeed, with respect to the last point, the potential that 'traditionally undervalued activities gain greater significance' from the Kud Chum CCS is highlighted in the proposal and briefing paper by Powell & Salverda (1999).

Specialised, though conceptual, arguments come from Johnson (1999) in a short article that advances a circumstantial view that gender relations are not particularly addressed in LET schemes. For instance, they may even compound the unequal burdens of care endemic to women. In a similar vein, albeit once again in a short article, Seyfang (2001b) is more optimistic in emphasising that CCSs give value to the traditional forms of work that women perform. Again on LETS (but more empirically), Tooke et. al. (2001) examine the micro-power dynamics of gender relations. The authors argue that LETS in some ways reinforce and in some ways readdress gender inequities. They are in contrast to Thorne (1996) in their view that the schemes do not necessarily translate the nature of social relations. The capacity to negotiate the value of skills, for them, depends on the situation and the relationship between the exchangees.

Lessons

Examining Mutual Credit Currency Systems in the form of LETS in the UK and the note-based CCS in Thailand has shown that these schemes do have some novel characteristics that re-evaluate the role of money. The literature review thereby raises some important points (and as a consequence, three research questions) regarding the transformative potential that CCSs may induce on gender relations in the Thai, as well as in a general context.

Consequently, the first question focuses on quantitative criteria;

- To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in purely tangible or economic terms?

This question is posed especially in light of the readings on the relationship of CCSs and Development. These showed that in order to appreciate the health and sustainability of a CCS, examination of the likes of its volume of trade, level of competition, quality of goods and services and degree of import substitution are required (Seyfang 1997). In other words, it is important to consider the purely quantitative figures of a CCS to determine its potential, as stated earlier, in not necessarily enhancing economic gain, but alleviating economic loss.

Secondly,

- To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in individual qualitative/intangible terms?

This question proposes a search on the equitable impacts of the CCSs on an individual level. The reading on 'Gender and Development' is prevalent here in the use, to various degrees, of all of the arguments of WID, WAD and GAD approaches. The more econometric work of Blumberg (2004) and Mee-Udon & Blumberg (2002) can be tailored with the importance of examining the possible burden that increased productive efforts may have on the welfare of women (Elson & Pearson 1986) as a consequence of involvement in a CCS (Johnson 1999) (Seyfang 2001b) (Tooke et. al. 2001). A critical aspect of questioning will also involve assessing the differences between practical gender needs and strategic interests at household, community and market level (Kabeer 1994).

Thirdly,

- To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in terms of collective qualitative/intangible terms?

This question is a derivative of the purported social and/or community impacts that CCSs are espoused to have (Doherty et. al. 1999, Powell & Salverda 1999, Pichpong 2000, Khlangpukiaw 2002, Puntasen et. al. 2002, Pichpong & Khlangpukhiaw 2002). These impacts are gendered in the sense that they act upon on a key institutional site ('community') where gendered norms are (re)constituted and maintained (Kabeer 1994, Kabeer & Subrahmanian 1996). A CCS may thus positively influence gendered Social Capital by formalising, institutionalising and perhaps concretising what could be considered to be informal ties or latent Social Capital (Parnwell 2003), however strong. On the other hand, they may negatively 'crowd out' (Morduch 1999) and appropriate gendered Social Capital for use that is detriment to the livelihood security of other villagers.

METHODOLOGY

A hybrid analysis was used in addressing the three research questions proposed. The logic of the analysis was based on the grafting of a Social Audit Approach (SAA) (Seyfang 1997), combined with, in terms of gender analysis, certain parts of the Harvard Analytical Framework (HAF) (Overholt et. al. 1991), the Moser Framework (Moser 1993) and the Social Relations Approach (SRA) (Kabeer 1994, Kabeer & Subrahmanian 1996).

The SAA diverges from typical audits in that it involves a comparison of values as well as efficiency. The approach serves to develop a series of quantitative and qualitative performance indicators that are usually defined relative to an organisation's 'values' or 'mission statement'. Neither of the two CC systems had formal documentation outlining values and mission. Tables 1 and 2 below, slightly adapted from Seyfang (1997), show how the indicator process could be more generally conceived without having any particular mission foci.

Audit Area	Indicators	Quantitative		CCS	Cash	Method Of Data Collection
		Qualitative	Indicators			
Economic benefits	Volume of trade		X	X		Survey and case study data from coordinators
Extent of Benefits	Number of members	X	X			Survey data
Scope Of Benefits	Variety Of 'Offers'	X	X	X	X	Directories
Economic Significance Of CCS To Members	Per capita trade; % of total expenditure or income in local currency		X	X	X	Survey and accounts data; questionnaire from members
Mobilising previously unutilised skills and resources	CCS trading which represents new economic opportunities	X	X	X		Questionnaire with members
Social or environmental benefits from local import substitution	Local goods production on CCS		X	X	X	Empirical data from coordinators
Benefits to non-members	CCS-supported businesses or community services	X		X		Data from coordinators
Costs to members	Membership fees, transaction costs	X	X	X	X	Data from coordinators
Costs to non-members	Diverted trade, more competition		X		X	Data from coordinators

Table 1: Indicators of economic and social benefits. $Ql = \text{qualitative}$, $Qt = \text{quantitative}$ (Seyfang 1997)

Audit Area	Indicators	Method Of Data Collection		
		CCS	Cash	
Qualitative	Quantitative			
CCS collective events	Social events held?	X	X	Survey and case study data from coordinators
Membership participation	% membership actively trading	X	X	Survey and accounts data
Participation in addition to trading	% membership who attend organisational meetings and social events	X	X	Survey data, questionnaires with coordinators
Non-tangible benefits	Subjective opinions on why CCS is important	X		X Questionnaires from members
Altruistic, non-competitive behaviour	Examples of non-market behaviour in CCSs	X		X Questionnaires from members

Table 2: Indicators of 'experience of community' (Seyfang 1997)

Table 1 investigates a wide array of economic and social indicators, but of course lacks disaggregation by gender and other social axes of difference. Table 2 can be regarded as more relevant to the third research question concerning gendered Social Capital. Hence, two questionnaires, targeting both CCS members and non-members (of both genders), were developed from these tables and from gender analysis frameworks. A concentration on time aspects, throughout both the questionnaires, served to encourage an appreciation of causality central to the research questions.

The research was conducted over 3 weeks in July 2005. In obtaining the qualitative data, the use of questionnaires instead of focus groups or structured/semi-structured interviews was used primarily as a consequence of the structural constraints of the research. The questionnaires were professionally translated into the local dialect.

Two research areas were considered for the purpose of this paper as a result of, firstly, the realisation that the Kud Chum district CCS had been extant for a number of years and was experiencing dwindling participation (Khlangphukiaw 2002, Puntasen et. al. 2002). Secondly, that the Nang Sapang Thong village CCS was newer (end of 2003) and thus potentially more vibrant. Assessing the gendered impacts of both newly applied and long-standing CCSs was seen to be more advantageous than a single situational assessment because together they would provide a time-dynamic in understanding the relationship of gender to CCSs, even with the obvious disadvantage that context and causalities varied.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Nong Sapang Thong Village CCS, Mukdahan

The village is located in the centre of Mukdahan province, itself situated in the Mekong valley (see map above). Being in the region of Isan, it relies on seasonal rain-fed agriculture that is unreliable - 1100-2100mm per annum, the majority of which is between the months April and September (Bell & Seng 2004). The village is approximately 5km from the nearest extra-local market (on a fairly well maintained tarmac arterial road), 30km from the district trading centre and 60km from the provincial centre. The village consists of approximately 68 households, some of which had been temporarily abandoned due to the high levels of migration characteristic to the region (FEER 1994)(Parnwell et. al. 2002). Roughly a third of the households still rely on Water Buffalo to assist agricultural labour and provide milk while another half have mechanised using small hand-driven tractors with 'paddle' wheels. A final third can be said to have diversified into off-farm and non-farm employment (Rigg 2003).

Response rates for the non-member questionnaires were high - 39.5 pairs (65%). The scheme itself has an official membership profile consisting entirely of women (16). A response of 69% (11) was gathered, while 94% of their partners responded (15).

Santisuk Village, Kud Chum district, Yasothon

The province of Yasothon lies directly south of Mukdahan and is 95% agricultural with annual earnings of 11 800 *baht* per person (Powell 2000) ranking it 68th among 73 provinces in terms of gross provincial product (GPP) (Parnwell et. al. 2003). The climate is variable and unpredictable, often placing significant stresses and shocks on the sustainable livelihoods of people in the province (with the added dimension that their capital portfolios are considered to be weak) (*ibid.*). Santisuk village itself is roughly 10 km to the nearest extra-local market (on a mix of tarmac and maintained dirt track) which also happens to be the provincial centre. It

consists of 33 households, approximately 10% of which were vacant as a consequence of migration. Many of the villagers are seen to suffer from extended debts to the Bank for Agriculture and Agriculture Co-operatives (BAAC) (Powell 2000b), from significant financial drain to the external economy (Pichpong & Khlandpukhiaw 2002, New Internationalist 2000) and from an erosion of community cohesion (Parnwell et. al. undated). Agricultural mechanisation was present but not commonplace and off/non-farm diversification was considered to be high.

A week in the village enabled 12 member surveys (of a then 24 members) and 8 non-member surveys (conservative representative estimates for this figure are considered to be 20% of non-members). The scheme itself consisted entirely of women, 11 (of 12) of which purported to be highly active in it.

Research Question 1: To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in purely tangible or economic terms?

One of the most interesting discoveries, present in both CCS schemes, is that although the alternative currency was not present in high volumes (approximately 10% of sales), it nonetheless was used consistently. In both areas then, the alternative currency was conceived as a discount measure. For instance, the figures below (from the second study area) include the number (variety) of different products offered and sold as well as the cumulative figures to clarify the quantity of sales. The figures serve to show that, even with exceptions, the magnitude of trade is extremely disproportional in favour of the mainstream currency. This disproportionality occurs despite the fact that the number (variety) of offers and sales of the alternative currency is often in keeping with the number of offers and sales of the mainstream currency. To clarify, it can be demonstrated that an average of 7 members participating in the market between June 2004 and March 2005 offered 11 items of which roughly half (45%) had a *boon* (local currency) discount. Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate this point by focusing on the number of products offered and sold. Figure 5 shows the parallels of this tendency with that of the tendency of sold number of products to, on average, have roughly half of their total proportion (46%) accounted for by *boon* discounts. Essentially then, figures 2 to 5 make the point that although the *magnitude* of offers and sales (cumulative) for the Thai *baht* and *boon* are highly disproportional, it is the *logic* of a consistent use of the *boon* in offers and sales (no matter how insignificant) that is remarkable.

Overall, the relative income from the CCS market in the first study area was more significant than in the second. The greatest significance in the second study area though was not opportunities gained *in* the scheme, but rather *outside* it⁴. Indeed, both areas showed that increased productivity was more evident than increased variety. This increased productivity in both cases did not necessarily divert trade from non-members and hence was not seen to create a zero-sum impact on livelihood opportunities in the villages. Import substitution was maintained in both areas with special significance for the second as drains through consumption, primarily of sweets, were somewhat rectified through the expansion of the product portfolio.

In conclusion then, understanding the impact of the CCSs in altering gender relations through the lens of tangible economic criteria has been useful to the extent that certain benefits

⁴ It could be hypothesised for future research that the participants in the older scheme (second study area) had time to mature the contacts and/or skills gained from increased productivity.

(varying in context) are witnessed from the economic health of the scheme. This economic lens shows that these benefits to women are more the result of an injection of logic than circulation of currency *per se*. In other words, the local currency seems to be consistently present regarding offers and sales and has provided discount opportunities and invigorated market traffic. In any case, with at least some increased economic power and potential, the likes of Boserup (1970) and Blumberg (2004) would contend that, at least from this blinkered efficiency perspective, women maintain some bargaining *potential*. The extent to which this focus highlights changes in gender *relations* however, is more questionable; it only highlights the economic health of the scheme and how this benefits women from an efficiency angle. It thus cannot be concluded from this research question alone whether CCSs transform or maintain existing gender relations in the villages.

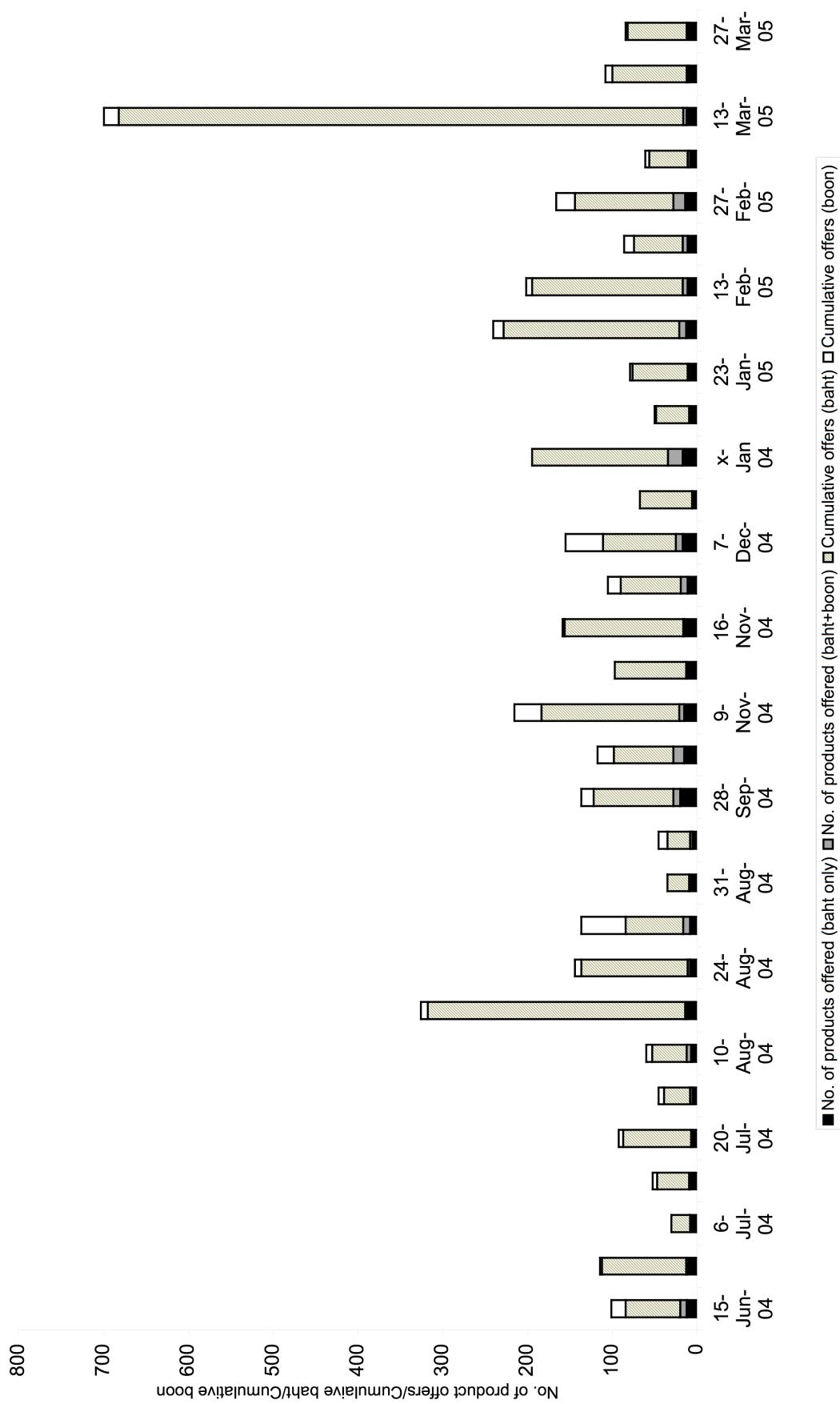


Figure 2: Product Offers – Magnitude of Cumulative Offers profile for Santisuk village CCS, 2004-2005

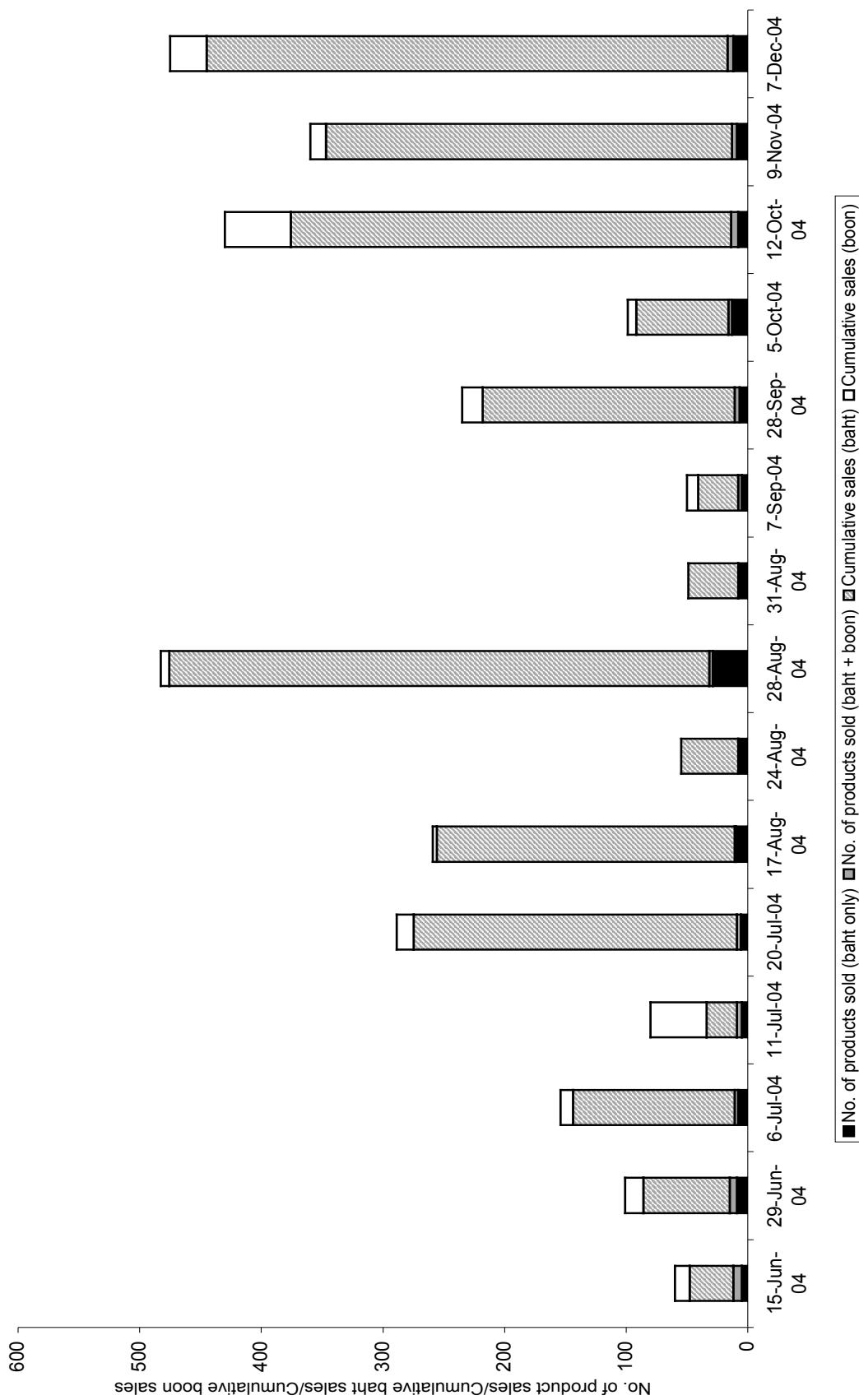


Figure 3: Product Sales – Magnitude of Cumulative Sales profile for Santisuk village CCS, 2004-2005

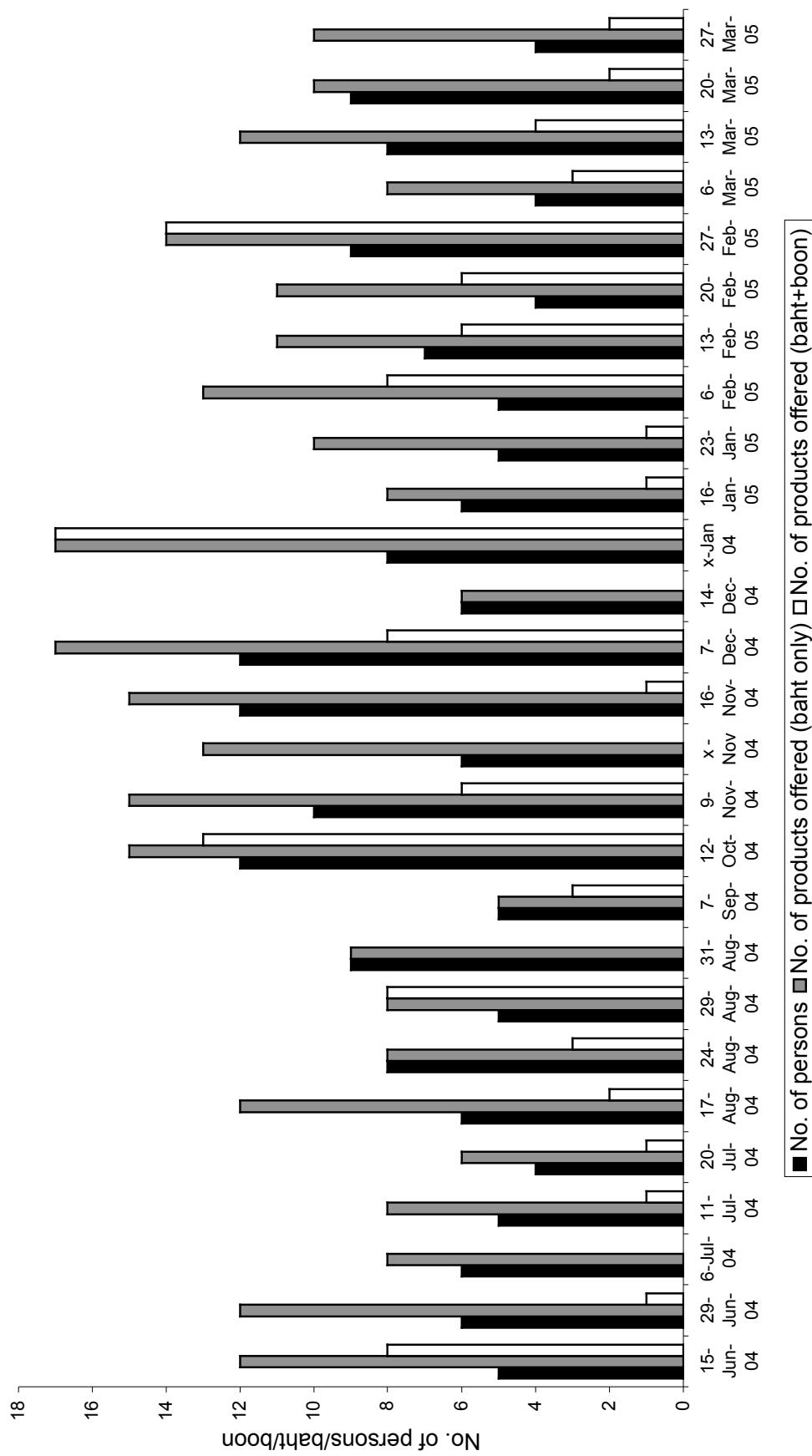


Figure 4: Participation - Product Offers trading profile for Santisuk village CCS, 2004-2005

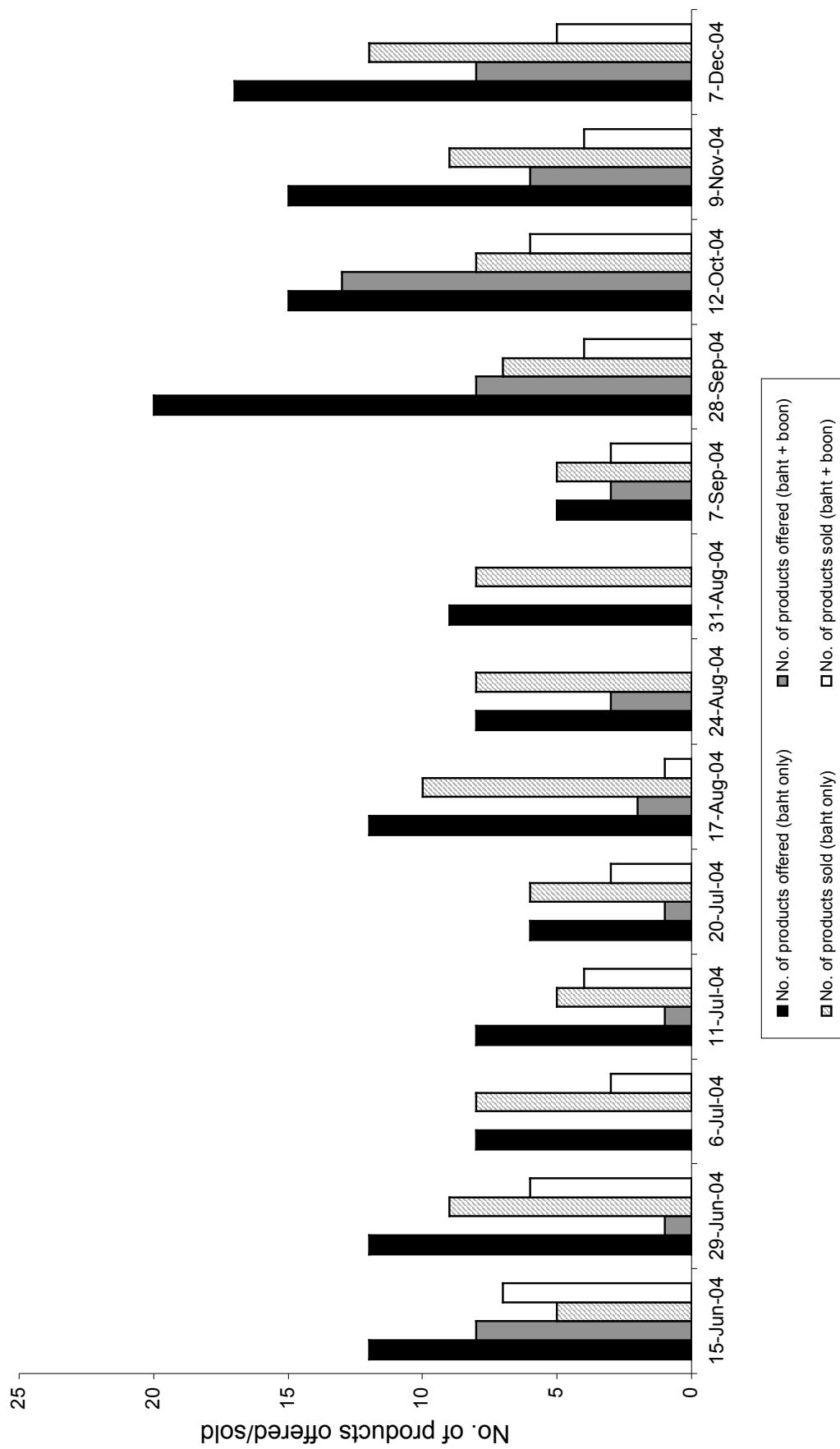


Figure 5: Product Offers – Product Sales trading profile for Santisuk village CCS, 2004-2005

Research Question 2: To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in individual qualitative/ intangible terms?

All of the gendered use-control/ use-access to resources and use-control of profits profiles in both study areas exhibited remarkably egalitarian distributions. These allocations, more obviously and reliably in the case of the second study area, had not changed as a consequence of the implementation of the scheme. The process of decision-making in arriving at these allocations could not be reliably determined for the first study area but it was concluded that for the second, a mix of personal, mutual and econometric-residual⁵ logics were used.

The study examining provision of practical gender interests revealed that income (to a lesser extent in the second study area) did assist everyday needs but network associations or applicability at the extra-local market level were not made in both cases. This indicates a locally constrained dimension to the benefits that meet practical gender interests. More positively, as per discussions of Powell & Salverda's (1999) proposal paper, the encouragement of monetisation in what were often bartering practices does re-value what are traditionally undervalued activities. Time, as a practical need, was seen to be more of a concern in the first study area with members declaring 'double-load' pressure and a high proportion of non-members declaring a fear of this pressure. It could be seen, on the other hand, that the economic benefits accrued to participants in Nang Sapang Thong village outweighed time sacrifices.

In regard to strategic gender interests, the second study area provided more confident data on an improved expansion of choices. Education from the scheme at the level of the household, CCS market, extra-local market and community politics was seen (less so the latter category) in both cases. Finally, change in 'status' and 'respect' was evident in both schemes, primarily in terms of self-perception. Of particular interest is the observation that all of member partners in the first study area specified that they had an increased respect for their wives.

Ultimately it must be argued that where the analysis focuses only on the transformation of gender relations at the qualitative/individual level, the extent of understandings are only that both the CCS schemes catalysed little changes for what were already highly egalitarian gender relations. These changes were particularly at the level of strategic gender interests (albeit at the entry-level of locally-specific education) and in terms of self-empowerment. It may still be argued that with these few changes, a certain degree of maintenance of *existing* gender interests are occurring. That is, the scheme is not seen to be contributing to a worsening climate of gender relations (apart from workload burdens) as painted in the forebodings of Parnwell & Arghiros (1996) and Whittaker (1999) in the literature review.

Research Question 3: To what extent can any causal transformative impact to gender relations in the villages from the implementation of the schemes be understood in terms of collective qualitative/ intangible terms?

In both study areas, a discourse of invigorated and deepened collective socialisation was evident, but not without some cautionary notes. In both areas, members articulated increased community support as well as access to discussions and meetings. Both areas also displayed

⁵ That is, some men see the scheme as insignificant and hence do not attempt to participate in decisions that pertain to the control of residual or minority resources.

significant deepening of relationships in the village context and expansion of contacts outside it. In the first study area however, the social ethic was a little deflated through the observations that members saw the scheme more in an economic stream of thought than a social one. Indeed, trust and interdependence was more of a priority than financial benefits in the second study area (as exemplified, perhaps, by its lower economic significance to members).

It was also clear from the responses that the scheme served to bolster other co-operative activities, although this effect also must be treated with caution. In the first study area, it was noted that the Organic Farmers group were seen to benefit highly from the scheme. It is notable that this group was organised and maintained by the same individual that co-ordinated the CCS activities. Many respondents in fact saw these groups as synonymous activities. Also, both the study areas already have a long history of collective endeavour – from the communist-separatist movement, a regional-ethnic identity and from previous government and/or NGO efforts (Parnwell & Rigg 1996, Khlandpukhiaw 2002). Indeed, Pichpong & Khlandpukhiaw (2002) state that the second study area was chosen specifically for its strong leaders, fair level of diversification and history of self-reliance.

It can be concluded that there is a high extent to which altered gender relations can be understood in terms of collective behaviour in the scheme. On one hand for instance, the research question highlights that gender strategic interest gains may be deflated by a concentration on economic rather than social benefits. It also highlights the possibility that these *gender* strategic interest gains can be re-conceived as *women's* interest gains by being narrowly attributed to a 'members only' and long-extant syndicate, as is seen to be the case in the first study area.

On the other hand, and in a more positive sense, it highlights what is seen to be a formalisation and expansion of primarily women's activities that has made available for them a more formal community managerial role. This is seen to be the greatest gender strategic interest attainment in what is historically a patriarchal 'entourage and circle' approach to patron-clientalism in Thai local governance (Hanks 1975; Rigg 1991, 1993; Powell 2002) where negative bureaucratic impacts often hamper the strong matrilocal-influenced wellbeing of women (Blumberg 2004).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications of the research can most appropriately be categorised into those that are specific to the Thai country and regional context, and those that are more generic. For specific implications there are three practical lessons. Firstly, the primary research conducted for this paper showed that there is a certain lack of depth and spread in the longitudinal trading data for the schemes. This issue prevents fully conclusive assessments of both of the schemes' impact over time and can be prevented with a locally owned and managed cyclical audit as espoused in the Social Audit Approach (Seyfang 1997).

Secondly, a concern is raised toward the production of knowledge itself in this paper; a serious methodological flaw is the lack of a reflexive ethnographic appreciation of context over time (Jackson & Cook 1999) that can only seriously be more-rectified through analysis of the scheme by researchers fluent in Thai culture.

Thirdly, it can be noted that the CCS schemes easily parallel with New/Neo-localism discourses and that the treatment of them under this light is a dangerous liaison⁶. The discussion of the three research questions divulges that although the schemes offer significant social-collective advantages to women they also house a low economic turnover that is only symbolically ‘alternative’. The schemes should not then, be romanticised either in Thai discourses or through the likes of Pacione’s (1997a, 1997b) promotion of CCSs as counter-hegemonic vessels sprouting beneath the shadows of a peripatetic capitalism. Thailand’s Rural Agricultural and Social Management Institute (RASMI) can take a central role in confronting these realisations.

More general implications for the research arena are that the CCS schemes do not *necessarily*, in agreement more with Tooke et. al. (2001) than Thorne (1996), causally transform social relations. Pushed to crude essentialisms, the research shows that the scheme in the first study area had more of an economic relations impact than one based on predominantly social interaction (though both showed significant self-empowerment). Of course, economic relations can impact on the social relations of gender, but there is no guarantee that this offers a proxy for structural *transformation* in equitable distribution of resource use and control or negotiation power. Nor, from another standpoint, do CCS schemes *necessarily* alter the wider setting of community discourse on power appropriation for ‘women’s interests.’

Nevertheless, the implications of this for wider research, dissemination and application concerning ‘symbolic economies’ are that CCSs reconfigure gendered social capital (and thus potential livelihood stresses) in ways that can be seen to contrast with the understandings of both Moore (1990) and Neuhouser (1995). Again though, the word *necessarily* is invoked when attributing much of these impacts purely to the implementation of the CCS schemes. A paramount caveat for this paper is that the region of *Isan* has some exceptional qualities. Future applications that may attempt to transform or partially highlight gender relations through CCS schemes ought to consider the highly egalitarian social system in Thailand and its Northeastern provinces as well as the history of collective actions there.

CONCLUSION

This paper has served as an initial response to the calls by Puntasen et. al. (2002) and Seyfang (2001b) to empirically assess the social, or more explicitly, the gendered impacts of a note-based Community Currency System at a local level. It can be ultimately concluded that on economic, distributional and collective levels of gender relations, all in both study cases were seen to have been somewhat altered by the implementation of the schemes. Naturally though, these alterations varied in their support of existing and transformative gender relations between the study areas. The *transformative* impact on gender relations in the studies is seen to be limited to the arena of collective action or Social Capital, moreso in the second study area.

In all then, CCSs should not be envisaged as instituting a positive abstract impact on gender relations but rather one that is superimposed onto their context while dialectically galvanising them. However, if the practical and general implications of this research are maintained, there is no reason why note-based CCSs, with their galvanising effects, cannot be heralded as exemplars of ‘gender redistributive’ (Kabeer 1994) projects that can transform, and not

⁶ Modernisation debates in Thailand are often tempered by the arguments of a ‘New-’ (Reynolds 2001) or rather ‘Neo-’ (Parnwell 2006) localism that romanticises both Thailand’s past and present realities (Vandergeest 1991, Hewison 2000, 2001).

maintain, the relationships between men and women. Indeed, as the implications section discusses, there is nothing to say that transformations will not occur in the economic and individual-social dimensions of CCS activity in other contexts where an exceptional gender egalitarian profile is not already consistent. At the same time, the research from questions 1 and 2 shows that the scheme also offers points of entry that can be considered 'gender-specific' and not gender-neutral (Kabeer 1994).

At first glance then, there are few reasons why CCS schemes should not thus mainstream a gender equality initiative in the few developing countries where they are already active or where they are seen fit to coincide with a developing countries' vision of a sustainable and realistic alternative community development agenda. As discussed however, much longitudinal and detailed work is needed to build confidence in this area of research which has even up until now only scratched the surface of a gendered social reality.

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