

Abstract

Active citizens can become a powerful driver of development by holding to popular account those that traditionally hold decision-making power at the local and national levels. Active citizenship draws from a long history of understanding the importance of community participation and ownership of development interventions. However, in spite of its inherent strengths, active citizenship may not be a possible (or optimal) outcome in all circumstances. This paper argues for the realistic expectation of active citizenship (and indeed participation) of one specific sub-population within Thailand. Estimates of the number of illegal migrants within Thailand vary from 800,000 to 1.5 million. The overwhelming majority of these migrants are Burmese, seeking to escape the political regime in Burma and improve their material standard of living. Working with these illegal Burmese migrants in Thailand is complex. The development needs that would be expected in any poor community, such as limited access to health services, economic insecurity, inadequate housing, etc. are added to by the precarious existence these migrants have in Thailand. This in turn hinders their ability to actively engage in the development process. This paper reviews the lessons learned by one Thai-based NGO working with illegal Burmese migrants for over 15 years. The unique strengths and weakness of these illegal communities are discussed, before the appropriateness of seeking to engage such communities as active citizens is explored.

Keywords: Burma, Thailand, Active citizenship, Illegal migrants, Sustainable development

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