



Mothers, Women, and HRDs Demand Relocation of Sugar and Biomass Power Plants: Safeguarding Thung Kula's Rice Development for European Export and Ensuring Public Participation

On July 11, 2023, Protection International Thailand and The Grassroots Law for Human Rights, Corporate Accountability, and Business Project (G'Law) would like to draw your attention to a peaceful assembly taking place at Roi Et City Hall. Mothers, women, and human rights defenders from the Hak Thung Kula People's Network (also known as The People who love Thungkula) are gathering to demand the relocation of the sugar production plant and biomass power plant away from the Thung Kula area. This area is designated for the development of jasmine rice, and the women and human rights defenders advocate for transforming Thung Kula into an organic farming area.

In Pathum Rat district, Banpong Sugar Company Limited plans to build a sugar mill that will process about 24,000 tons of sugarcane a day. Like most of the planned sugar mills in the Northeast, the facility is accompanied by a power plant fuelled by bagasse. The company has faced strong local opposition since the plans became known eight years ago.

The Cabinet approved the development of the agricultural sector with modern technology on November 15, 2022, with the goal of establishing a high-value bio-economy foundation. As part of this initiative, the cultivation of jasmine rice in Thung Kula Rong Hai, Thung Samrit, and other potential areas is being promoted, ensuring compliance with safe and organic agricultural standards. The objective is to achieve a comprehensive product standard and establish strong connections with the Thung Kula Rong Hai Hom Mali Rice Market.

It is noteworthy that approximately 80 percent of organic rice cultivation areas in Thailand are located in the North-eastern region, particularly in the Thung Kula area, which includes Yasothon, Surin, Maha Sarakham, Sisaket, Roi Et provinces, and Ubon Ratchathani Province. The remaining 20 percent is situated in the upper northern region. The majority of the organic rice produced is exported, with a significant market being the European Union.

The Hak Thung Kula People's Network has observed that the second public hearing (referred to as Kor. 2) scheduled for July 18, 2023, is being organized to facilitate the preparation of two Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for the sugar factory and biomass power plant projects. However, we express deep concern regarding this stage, as it appears to justify the establishment of the factory in the Thung Kula area, despite its exclusion as a sugarcane plantation promotion zone for Samanchan and other companies affiliated with Ban Pong Sugar Company's network. Consequently, we cannot accept this process.

Furthermore, this stage seems designed to limit public participation. The authorities have chosen to set up the hearing venue within the company's premises, clearly demarcated by fences and gates, which effectively handpicks individuals who have been recruited and paid to attend. This biased approach

excludes dissenting citizens and human rights defenders, preventing them from entering the venue. Any attempts by them to participate may result in lawsuits being filed against them for trespassing on the company's land.

These actions undermine the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and meaningful public engagement that should be integral to the decision-making process. It is crucial that all citizens, regardless of their views, have the opportunity to express their concerns and contribute to discussions regarding projects that may have significant impacts on their communities and the environment. The authorities should ensure an impartial and open platform for public participation, respecting the rights of dissenting voices and human rights defenders.

G'Law, The Grassroots Law for Human Rights, Corporate Accountability, and Business Project, is an innovative initiative aimed at enhancing and broadening the implementation of the PPM Campaign for Public Policy on Mineral Resources. G'Law focuses on empowering community-based volunteers and Women Human Rights Defenders (W/HRDs) by equipping them with knowledge and skills to effectively address issues concerning business operations and human rights violations at the grassroots level. Through G'Law, they aim to strengthen the capacity of these individuals to engage in grassroots activism and advocate for justice in communities affected by such challenges.