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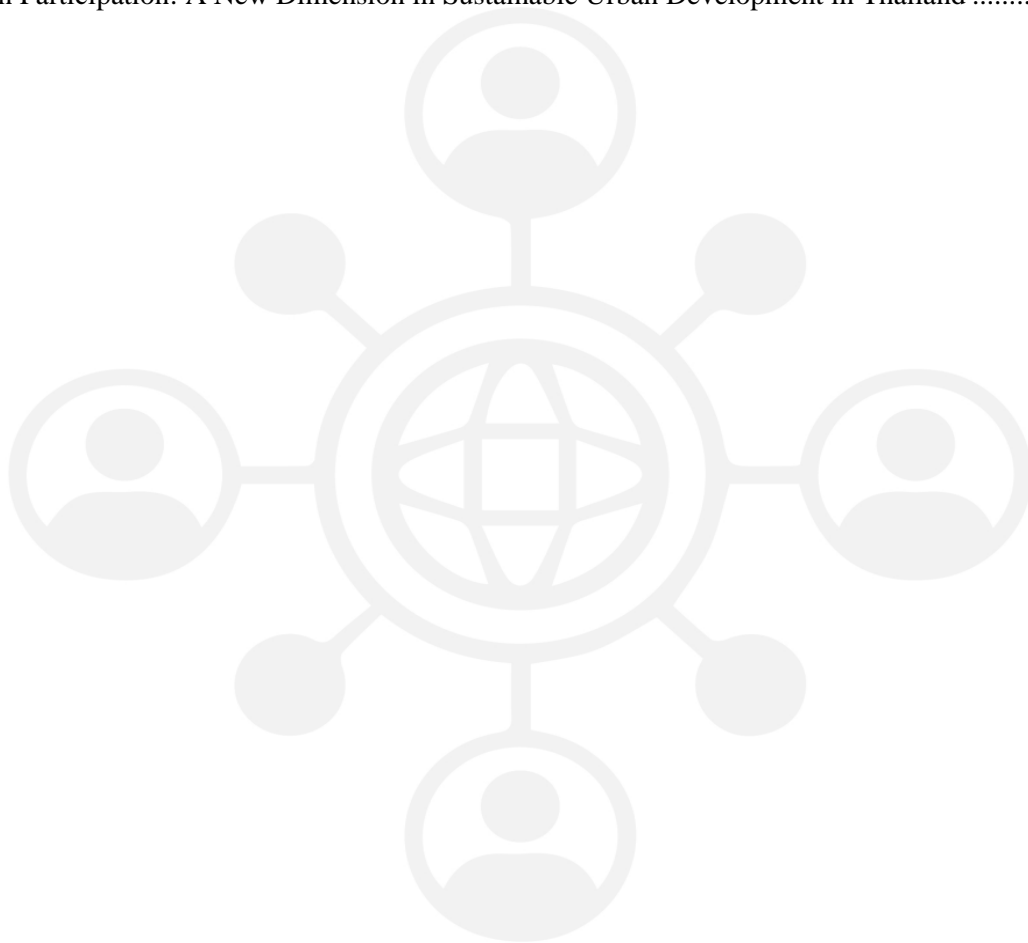*Jan 27-28, 2024*

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Full Paper Proceeding

Citizen Participation: A New Dimension in Sustainable Urban Development in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand has a national strategic plan and local development plan to address economic growth, changes in social structure, and the need to develop essential infrastructure. However, it has been observed that local development must depend on public participation mechanisms. Presently, there are numerous limitations, such as variations in the conditions of different areas, the fundamental understanding of the people, the role of the state, and the readiness to participate in sustainable local development. The objective of this research is to analyze the laws and sociological conditions in Thailand that impact the process of public participation in local development and to propose guidelines for promoting public participation in development. This study utilized data collection methods, including document research, organizing meetings, and conducting interviews with community leaders and academics. The research offers policy and legal recommendations to enhance citizens' awareness of democratic principles and their role in participating in the administration of local government organizations. It also suggests assigning responsibilities to relevant agencies to drive development from the grassroots, fostering the concept of strong communities as the cornerstone of developing a "Thai Democratic Identity".

Introduction

At present, the ongoing trend of population expansion in urban areas in Thailand necessitates comprehensive infrastructure development, job creation, and effective urban environmental management to accommodate the rapid population increase. This is essential for creating a livable city that caters to all segments of society, emphasizing a high quality of life, environmental sustainability, a robust economy, and efficient management, coupled with technological advancements. Notably, advancements in communication, transportation, and energy present significant opportunities for multidimensional city development, encompassing economic growth, improved transportation, enhanced energy efficiency, human resource development, and the conservation and restoration of the urban environment. This aligns seamlessly with the national strategy's goal of decentralizing economic prosperity, promoting societal development, and addressing inequalities across various dimensions.

Furthermore, it has been observed that Thailand tends to focus on the development of its capital without concurrently fostering growth in regional cities. This has led to the concentration of growth in a single city, resulting in the saturation of urban resources and infrastructure, hindering its capacity to meet the demands for the country's economic expansion. Simultaneously, the regional cities and centers of prosperity remain underdeveloped, failing to support and drive the nation's economic potential to its fullest. As global urban development trends indicate, the future direction involves the cultivation of medium-sized cities with populations ranging from approximately 700,000 to 2 million people. These cities are poised to exhibit greater potential to support economic activities, with their economic contributions forming a significant proportion of the world economy. In light of this, preparing for sustainable development within local communities becomes imperative. To achieve this, there is a need to fortify the public sector and enhance participation in development partnerships, ensuring the potential for effectiveness. Collaboration among the local populace is crucial for the successful development and sustainable management of the area. This proactive approach will pave the way for inclusive and sustainable growth, supporting the overall economic trajectory of the country.

In the current scenario, challenges persist regarding public participation in area development, characterized by the following issues (Community Organization Development Institute (Public Organization), 2022):

1. Social Circumstances and Community Factors: Lack of concrete participation in determining the direction of local administration, budgeting, and operations of local administrative organizations.

2. Strength of Community and Leaders: Varied sociological conditions affecting the strength of the community and its leaders, pivotal for community development.

3. Guidelines for Community Development: Lack of clear guidelines for community development planning and insufficient cooperation from relevant government agencies.

4. Supporting Factors for Community Participation: The need for utilizing digital tools in community development to enhance people's participation and engagement.

5. Adaptation to Changes: Communities face challenges in adapting to changes in the economy, society, politics, and national development across diverse areas.

These issues present significant obstacles to regional development. This article aims to address the imperative of fostering public participation in urban development in Thailand. It will offer compelling suggestions for collaborative development initiatives involving the government, private sector, and civil society. The objective is to create a synergy that overcomes existing challenges and facilitates sustainable urban development.

In this article, we will delineate strategies and plans for area development in Part 1, focusing on fostering strong community innovation. Part 2 will explore the tools instrumental in driving sustainable development within this dimension, encapsulated by the concept of " Thai Democratic Identity." Lastly, in Part 3, we will conduct a comprehensive analysis of policy and legal recommendations aimed at promoting and sustaining urban development. This three-part structure aims to provide a holistic view of the multifaceted approach required for effective and enduring urban growth.

Part 1: Strategy and Area Development Plan

In this section, we will explore significant development plans aimed at fostering robust public participation in local development. Thailand has established strategies and plans at various levels to facilitate change and development, serving as the primary mechanisms propelling progress. The details are as follows:

1.1 National Strategic Plan (2018 – 2037)

According to Section 65 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, the state is mandated to establish a national strategy for sustainable development goals based on the principles of good governance. This strategy serves as a framework for creating cohesive and integrated plans, fostering a collective effort toward the defined objectives. The preparation of the national strategy is governed by the law on national strategy. (Royal Gazette, 2021)

Under Strategy 6, focusing on areas and smart livable cities in the master plan aligned with the national strategy, the goal is to achieve optimal urban development across the country. The objective is to create economically vibrant centers that provide employment opportunities and housing, while also preserving areas for conservation that ensure the safety of life and property. This approach is in harmony with the unique local identity and potential of each city, emphasizing an efficient city management system and facilities that cater to the diverse needs of all residents. The plan also underscores effective environmental management and the creation of resilient cities capable of adapting to changes in the economy, society, environment, and technology.

The strategy aims to harness the potential and opportunities inherent in each city through systematic development, with a keen focus on the impact on natural resources and the environment. Active participation of relevant development partners is encouraged, and there is a concerted effort to promote smart cities in areas ready for development through the application of modern technology. The three primary goals of this strategy are:

1. Enhancing Competitiveness: Making Thailand a center of economic prosperity and societal advancement across all regions, thereby spreading economic and social prosperity.

2. Creating Livable Environments: Developing a landscape map to guide the creation of livable cities, stable countryside, sustainable agriculture, and eco-industry. This includes plans for the conservation of natural resources and archaeological sites.

3. Reducing Regional Inequality: Working towards minimizing the gap of inequality between different regions, promoting balanced development and opportunities for all.

1.*2 Master Plan under the National Strategy (6) Issues: Smart Livable Areas and Cities (2018 - 2037)*

The Master Plan under the National Strategy for smart livable areas and cities (2018-2037) aligns with Strategy 6, focusing on developing livable cities across every region of the country. The overarching objectives are to establish these cities as economic centers, providing sources of employment and housing, while also incorporating areas for conservation that prioritize the safety of life and property. The plan emphasizes alignment with the unique local identity and potential of each city, featuring an efficient city management system and facilities designed to cater to the diverse needs of all demographic groups. It further underscores the importance of effective environmental management and flexibility in city structures, allowing adaptation to changes in the economy, society, environment, and technology. (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023)

Key elements of the Master Plan include:

1. Systematic Development: Harnessing the potential and opportunities inherent in each city through a systematic planning approach.

2. Environmental Considerations: Paying careful attention to the impact on natural resources and the environment throughout the development process.

3. Participation of Development Partners: Encouraging active involvement and collaboration with relevant development partners.

4. Smart City Initiatives: Promoting the development of smart cities in areas that are ready for advancement by leveraging modern technology.

The Master Plan aims to create resilient, adaptable, and technologically advanced urban environments that not only meet the immediate needs of residents but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and prosperity of the regions. Through this strategic framework, Thailand aspires to achieve the overarching goals of the National Strategic Plan, fostering economic competitiveness, creating livable environments, and reducing regional inequality.

In this plan, the focus is on transforming the city into a smart, livable urban center capable of supporting economic activities, providing housing, and reducing inequality. The aim is to enhance the quality of life for all segments of the population in the area and propel the development of smart cities in locations with significant potential. This involves leveraging modern technology to enhance the city management system in every dimension, ensuring maximum efficiency in various aspects of urban living.

The city's development is categorized into two types:

1. Economic Center Cities: This category encompasses the development of economic center cities within regions, including Bangkok and its surrounding areas, Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, cities in the Eastern Special Development Corridor, Songkhla, and Phuket. The objective is to equip these cities with the potential to conduct economic activities comparable to large international cities while maintaining a high standard of livability. This entails a strong emphasis on infrastructure development and the establishment of extensive mass transit systems. Furthermore, the plan promotes the transformation of these cities into smart cities with a digital economy, enabling them to compete internationally in the era of Industry 4.0. This approach aims to expand service capabilities and enhance the cities' ability to support operations for economic activities on a larger scale.

2. Medium-Sized Cities: In this category, the focus is on the development of medium-sized cities. The emphasis is on creating comprehensive and standardized infrastructure and positioning these cities as economic and service centers for the surrounding areas. The goal is to generate employment opportunities in the region and contribute to the reduction of

inequality. This strategy seeks to foster balanced growth and development in medium-sized cities, creating localized hubs that support economic activities and enhance the overall well-being of the community.

1.3 National Security Policy and Plan (2023 - 2027)

This strategic plan has evolved from the Border Security Strategy and Development Strategy, aiming to fortify national security. A key focus is placed on prioritizing the development of individuals, communities, and specific target areas to address security challenges at their roots. The comprehensive development process is integral to reinforcing security measures in tandem with security operations. These operations span across security target areas, covering the inner regions, border areas, coastal areas, and islands. (Office of the National Security Council, 2023)

Key aspects of the plan include:

1. Grassroots Development: Significantly emphasizing the development of people, communities, and identified target areas to effectively address security challenges from the grassroots level. The comprehensive development process seeks to instill a profound sense of security, foster unity, harmony, and resilience among individuals and communities.

2. Security Operations: Implementing security operations that encompass designated target areas, spanning inner regions, border areas, coastal areas, and islands. These operations are strategically designed to enhance security measures and fortify the specified target areas against potential threats.

The ultimate objective, as articulated by the Office of the National Security Council, is to ensure that "people, communities, and target areas" not only develop a heightened sense of security but also possess immunity, unity, and harmony. This collective development effort aims to enable these entities to collaboratively progress with neighboring countries, promoting security, mutual benefits, and the overall happiness and well-being of the people. The plan envisions a secure and cooperative environment extending beyond national borders for the prosperity and contentment of the populace.

Part 2: Strong Community Innovation - Tools for Driving Sustainable Development in the Form of " Thai Democratic Identity "

2.1 Context of Thai Society and Guidelines for Building Strength

Historically, Thai society exhibited a remarkable capacity to address community needs autonomously, with minimal reliance on external support or government intervention. Communities were largely self-sufficient. However, contemporary social conditions have undergone a transformation, leading communities to increasingly depend on state mechanisms for support (Pornamarin Promgird et al., 2021). This shift is exacerbated by national development policies, creating significant challenges that limit community participation channels. The evolving situation has resulted in the government sector assuming the role of the primary provider of social welfare for nearly all communities.

This overreliance on the state has led to a gradual erosion of community autonomy, impacting development in various sectors where the state traditionally played a role, such as public health and infrastructure. The imbalance has raised concerns about the sustainability of communities, as the state assumes greater responsibility for functions that were historically managed locally. The resulting challenges highlight the need for innovative tools that empower communities to regain their autonomy and actively participate in their own sustainable development. The forthcoming sections will explore the "Thai Democratic Identity" framework as a means to address these challenges and foster robust community innovation.

Therefore, the development of a strong community is rooted in "Thai Democratic Identity", as determined through the examination of the Thai community's context outlined above. The National Reform Council and the Community Organization Development Institute (Public Organization) have jointly concluded that empowering communities to address their challenges necessitates "Innovations to Strengthen Communities." This involves several key aspects:

1. Community Participation: Building a strong community requires the active participation of individuals within the community. Strong communities emerge when community members engage in managing their own affairs. When needed, communities can seek collaboration and support from external entities, including both government and private sectors, for resources, training, advice, etc. This collaborative approach prepares communities to address their challenges independently.

2. Effective Community Leadership: Successful community problem-solving revolves around having capable community leaders. Strong communities establish internal organizations and have dedicated leaders who possess ideals, sacrifice, dedication, and sincerity. These leaders must undergo training to work effectively within communities. Additionally, fostering collaboration among leaders from various fields is crucial for exchanging ideas, promoting community development, and building collective consciousness.

3. Transition to Strong Citizens: Community members must transition from being passive recipients of help to becoming "Strong Citizens." This implies that individuals within the community actively contribute to development, monitor issues, and unite against threats that jeopardize the community's way of life. This shift reduces reliance solely on government assistance.

4. Culture of Sacrifice for the Community: In a strong community, residents learn to live together, support one another, and make sacrifices-whether physical, mental, or material-for the betterment of the community and its members. This collective sacrifice forms a crucial foundation for community awareness and strength, enabling members to collaboratively address challenges.

5. Adaptability to the Modern World: A strong community must be dynamic and adaptable to the modern world. Leveraging innovation to strengthen the community is vital in an online and digital age. This involves facilitating direct democracy at the grassroots level, creating platforms for community members to voice their opinions, using modern technology, social media, and various platforms to drive community engagement. This includes stimulating participation, addressing critical community issues, planning, building networks, and engaging in participatory budgeting.

These processes serve as guidelines for building strong communities at the local level. Strengthening communities at the sub-district level serves as the foundation for broader strength. Communities play a pivotal role in determining development directions and addressing issues in their areas, serving as a cornerstone of " Thai Democratic Identity." These foundations are instrumental in establishing a democratic framework deeply rooted in Thai identity.

2.2 Opportunity to Participate in Urban Development and Community Strengthening by the Civil Society Sector

In community development, the civil society sector plays a crucial role in influencing development across various domains. Legal frameworks in Thailand encourage public participation at different levels, including:

1. Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand: Section 77 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand mandates that state actions affecting the people must involve a public hearing process. While these constitutional provisions are broad, additional laws are required to specify criteria and procedures for soliciting opinions to achieve the intended objectives.

The constitution emphasizes rights and freedoms, with a focus on community rights. This includes joint conservation or revival of traditions, the maintenance and utilization of natural resources, and the obligation for people to participate with the state in protecting, promoting, and maintaining environmental quality to ensure community health. It also guarantees the right to participate in various operations such as local government involvement, elections, and engagement with local administrators.

2. Official Information Act of 1997: This law stipulates that government agencies are obligated to disclose information related to their operations, enabling public access. When citizens are informed about government activities, they can actively participate by providing opinions and scrutinizing government agencies.

3. Royal Decree on Good Government Administration of 2003: Aimed at enhancing public administration efficiency, this decree emphasizes a new approach that includes policies, goals, and operational plans. It establishes a framework for good governance, serving as a guideline for supervising and determining government policy and practice.

4. Regulation of the Prime Minister's Office on Public Hearings of 2005: These regulations address citizen participation in providing opinions to government agencies during the preparation of public projects and policies. They outline methods

for widespread participation, but the law's effectiveness depends on the discretion exercised in determining the approach for seeking public opinions.

5. Regulations of the Ministry of Interior regarding budgetary methods of Local Administrative Organizations of 2022: These regulations specify budgeting methods for Local Administrative Organizations, using the development plan of the Local Administrative Organizations as a guideline. The development plan results from collaboration between local residents and government agencies, linking it to budget allocation for the local area.

While Thailand's legal tools establish criteria for public participation, the success of such engagement relies on the cooperation and understanding of local residents. An awareness of one's right to participate in public affairs is crucial. Additionally, the strength of the community and influential leaders play pivotal roles in fostering community strength and effective participation in local administration.

Part 3: Summary and recommendations for sustainable local development.

Although the state has established criteria and methods for public participation in local development, including the formulation of development plans at various levels, development cannot occur without the active involvement of the people guided by clear participation guidelines. The state's sincerity in providing opportunities for citizens to participate, along with the strength and clarity of community leaders, facilitates cooperation between the community and local government agencies. Participation formats vary in each locality; for instance, some areas have open public spaces for citizens to express opinions.

In summary, the analysis highlights that while the state has established criteria and methods for public participation in local development, the success of development initiatives hinges on active citizen engagement guided by clear participation guidelines. The sincerity of the state in fostering opportunities for citizen participation, coupled with the strength and clarity of community leaders, plays a pivotal role in fostering cooperation between the community and local government agencies. The presence of diverse participation formats in different localities, such as open public spaces for expressing opinions, underscores the variability of citizen engagement.

The study reveals that public participation is influenced by the political culture within communities. Many communities exhibit active participation in public spaces, where residents express political opinions and engage in local administration. While some communities rely on local leaders as primary drivers, others benefit from the involvement of civil society organizations that stimulate and encourage public participation.

Recommendations for sustainable local development based on this analysis include:

1. Enhancing Citizen Awareness: The government should prioritize initiatives that educate citizens about the concepts of democracy and public participation, emphasizing the significant role citizens play in supporting government operations.

2. Support for Civil Society: Encourage the integration and operation of civil society, with the state playing a supportive role in promoting mechanisms that strengthen the civil society sector.

3. Acknowledging Diversity: Recognize and accommodate the diversity within communities, considering both geographical and cultural differences. This recognition should be reflected in the operational readiness of officials working in various areas.

4. Promoting Civic Culture: Foster a civic culture within communities, encouraging citizens to actively exercise their right to vote, pay taxes, and fulfill their duties in government administration as stipulated by law.

5. Budget Allocation: Support local development through strategic budget allocation linked to locally created development plans. Funds should be allocated based on the specific needs of each area, maximizing the effective use of budget resources to meet community requirements.

These recommendations aim to create a foundation for sustainable local development by fostering active citizen engagement, recognizing local diversity, and promoting a collaborative approach between communities and government agencies.

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