



Deliberative Democracy, Public Participation and Community Problem Solving: A Case Study of Nong-Or SAO, Srisatchanalai District, Sukhothai Province

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to foster high levels of public participation in the community in order to promote a better quality of life in nine villages in Nong-Or Sub-district Administrative Organization, Srisatchanalai District, Sukhothai Province. The idea of deliberative democracy was employed as a core principle of the study. The research methodology, process, and tools were carefully designed, implemented, and conducted through research collaboration and various sectors in the communities. Frequency and measures of central tendency were used for quantitative data analysis. Analytic induction was used for qualitative data analysis to interpret and create conclusions based on data obtained from the research tools. It is revealed that, by employing the study's four main tools namely: 1) Governance Snapshot Assessment, 2) Community Score Cards, 3) Budget Literacy, and 4) Action, this research could make a change for the better in all villages. The results of quantitative data analysis and all the study's tools make clear that the problems of insufficient water, unhealthy drinking water, career supplement requirements, frequent power outages, and facilities and exercise equipment demand have been acknowledged, discussed, and resolved by active cooperation. This study suggests that governmental agencies apply research tools in the process of policymaking and policy implementation. It is hoped that both the public sector and villagers would have more knowledge and skills to employ meaningful deliberative democracy which can be used to solve the communities' problems. More importantly, government agencies could be able to solve problems and respond to people's needs more efficiently.

Keywords: Social Resolution, Participatory Processes, Public Participation, Local Problem Solving, Thailand

Introduction

Geographically, Thailand can be divided into four regions with 77 provinces in total. The north region of Thailand encompasses 40% of the country's territory, and consists of 17 provinces. According to the Human Achievement Index in 2019, the North of Thailand was found to be the region with the highest Participation Index. (The Participation Index takes into account 4 factors, namely voter turnout, community groups, households participating in local groups, and households participating in social services). The region received the highest average score of 0.6810 points (whereas the country's average score was 0.6490 points), with the highest average scores for Lamphun, Nan, and Phayao (ranked numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively in the country). However, when only the scores of the Lower Northern provinces were considered, Sukhothai was found to have the highest average score in the sub-region, ranking number 5 in Thailand. It should be noted that, encouraging people to contribute to local affairs in Thailand is not easy, even though many local governments accept the significance of people's participation (Wegelin, 2002) and have employed many strategies to encourage greater participation (Krueathep, 2004). Arguably, these provinces have tried to promote public participation very well.

Nevertheless, when other indices such as those for Health, Education, Employment, Income, Housing and Living Environment, Family and Community Life, and Transport and Communication were considered, Sukhothai did not rank very high in the country; number 44 for Health, 47 for Education, 77 for Employment, 34 for



Income, 35 for Housing and Living Environment, 48 for Family and Community Life, and 47 for Transport and Communication. It could, therefore, be observed that these figures were incongruent with the province's high average score for the Participation Index. A crucial question could be made as to why Sukhothai has such a large difference between public participation and other indices.

By examining Sukhothai province in terms of public participation in particular, it is found that Nong-Or Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO), which is situated in Si Satchanalai District, is the only SAO that had an enforced self-management charter. The drafting and enforcing of the charter followed clear procedures based on the principles of public participation and transparency. The administrators, staff, and working team of Nong-Or SAO drafted the charter with cooperation from scholars, personnel from the public sector, the mass media, and local people. The drafting process can be considered as an advanced step toward democratization (Suksawas, Soithong, & Mayer, 2018). This is the central concern of this study as to why a province with the high level of public participation has failed in promoting a good quality of life to its residents.

This study, therefore, attempts to employ the strength of Sukhothai's communities, particularly in Nong-Or SAO, — where there is a high level of public participation in the community — to promote a better quality of life for the villagers. It is believed that when the process of defining and solving public problems are engaged by the public, not only performance management of the governmental sectors has the potential to be more accountable and perform more effective (Booyesen, 2011), but members of the public will also become empowered (Mitchell, 2005). Consequently, the public will greatly benefit and their quality of life can be promoted.

In order to achieve the goal of this study, this study follows the principle of the Participatory Action Research (PAR). The process of PAR needs the involvement of researchers and organized members of the community to take action to address community problems and to improve or solve their issues (MacDonald, 2012). The core framework of PAR, as argued by Minkler (2000, p. 191), involves a “cyclical process of fact finding, action, reflection, leading to further inquiry and action for change”. This study designs its framework according to the argument of Minkler (2000) by implementing four main tools which will be further discussed in the methods session. In practice, this study works through collaboration from various sectors comprised of researchers, academia, local governments, the public sector, and residents in the community to accomplish its goal.

Literature Review

Concept of Deliberative Democracy

It is important to get an understanding of the extent to what deliberative democracy is. Over the past decade, deliberative democracy or discursive democracy (Amy, 1991; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008) has increasingly attracted attention from various groups such as philosophers, political scientists, reformists, and legal theorists (See Bohman, 1998; Button & Mattson, 1999; Parkinson, 2003; Weeks, 2000). Undeniably, deliberative democracy is one of the complex ideals which can be practiced in both theory and real world practice (Chambers, 2003). By using the lens of practical form, deliberative democracy is a form of democracy in which discussion and friendly discourse are crucial for the process and output of the decision-making. It can be an ideal of public reason. Public decisions are made through stakeholder agreement – and rejected if stakeholders disagree (Bohman, 1998). In the practical stage, it is very crucial that individuals “go beyond the self-interests typical in preference aggregation and orient themselves to the common good” (Bohman, 1998, p. 402). The main idea of its concept focuses strongly on the free public reasoning of equal citizens, fundamental rights and freedom. Citizens need to



be encouraged to participate in social issues through the process of dialogue and discussion to pursue a common good. This study, therefore, strongly attempts to examine the practical method of deliberative democracy.

Concept of Public Participation

It is vital to question why public participation is important to Thai villages. This study argues that public participation is very significant because, as is recognized in a wide body of literature, it offers various benefits to both citizens and government. In relation to how it benefits citizens, key findings within the literature on the theory of participatory democracy suggest that public participation provides participants with numerous valuable skills and educates them in various aspects. The benefits were mostly in three areas: 1) democratic skills (Ikeda & Kobayashi, 2007; Smith, 2009), 2) generalized trust (Hadenius, 2004; Uhlaner, Cain, & Kiewiet, 1989), and most notably 3) political responsibilities (Blair, 2000). Second, in regard to benefits to governments, various studies have noted that public political participation has positive impacts on all levels of government (Cavaye, 2004; Loran, Murray, & Shaffer, 2004; Nel, 2004; Smith, 2009). By boosting citizen participation, it enables governmental agencies to 1) design services that better meet the demands and expectations of the people, 2) prioritize services more effectively, 3) set performance standards relevant to citizens' demands, 4) foster cooperation between state agencies and residents and identify problems promptly. Therefore, it is clear that public participation can assist all levels of the government in performing their functions more professionally and fruitfully. This study argues that public participation is very important and needs to be employed to create meaningful strategies to better society.

Methods and Materials

As noted earlier, this study is a Participatory Action Research as it aims to follow the concept of deliberative democracy and to be a collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on local social issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking an equivalent role in implementing tools in the locality. The study itself is an approach to research as it is a set of practices for originating, designing, conducting, analyzing, and acting on the research. In this study, many different methods are used. There are interviews, surveys, small and large meetings, group discussions, basic statically analysis and actions.

Process of the Study and the Study Tools

The study encompasses six steps and uses four main tools which are 1) Governance Snapshot Assessment, 2) Community Score Cards, 3) Budget literacy, and 4) Action. The process can be described by the following figure:

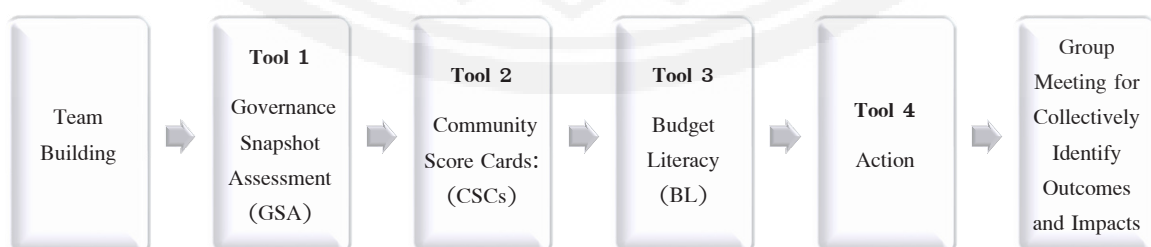


Figure 1 Process of the Study.



Step 1: Team Building: Perhaps the most important task to project success will be determined largely by the people in the target area – local leaders with experience and commitment, and their ability to work with and bring together various social groups from all nine villages. The research team will hold discussions with stakeholders in Nong-Or SAO to gauge their willingness to participate and the skills they may have to offer. The research team will convene meetings to discuss information and establish a friendly “team spirited” atmosphere among participants and prepare them to work effectively towards the shared objectives, as a multi-stakeholder team. The team will be responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating the progress of project activities in the target area. At the outset of the meeting, the research team will present the project framework, initial activities, and clarify expected roles and responsibilities of the group regarding the overall project to all stakeholders.

Step 2: Tool #1 Governance Snapshot Assessment (GSA): To start working in each village, questions examining citizens’ appreciation of government performance can be raised. To shed some light on such questions, GSA will be taken into action. The assessment enables citizens to assess the quality of public services and will be used to solicit their opinions about the accessibility and quality of available services. To assess this, the researchers will conduct Area Working Groups (AWG) training courses to teach basic research methods and skills for simple face-to-face questionnaire surveys. To appraise the current quality of government, the villagers from all nine villages will be asked by AWG to rank three public service deliveries that they are unsatisfied with the most. The results from the survey will be processed using SPSS. The analysis and interpretations are based upon the collected data. Frequency will be employed to highlight the most critical public services in the villages. Markedly, public accountability and responsibility, rather than blame, are the desired outcome of this tool. It is hoped that results of the assessment can lead to significant engagement by public officials and substantial positive change in every single village.

Step 3: Tool #2 Community Score Cards (CSCs): A simple but powerful tool to let feedback from users of public services be heard by the public agencies. It does not only have a potential to bring together public service providers and communities to evaluate the quality of delivery of services, but also enables the improvement of such deliveries (Björkman & Svensson, 2009; Sanchez-Betancourt & Vivier, 2019). Additionally, it does not only provide an opportunity for direct dialogue between the users to service providers, but it also effectively engages in public deliberations on priority issues.

The first public meetings in each village will be organized to raise awareness and get all stakeholders involved in study. The meeting will involve various groups, such as government officers, representatives of Nong-Or SAO, local leaders, villagers, and AWG. After discovering what the top three most critical public service deliveries in each village are, the team will then report to the public. This can reflect the broad picture of the effectiveness of public performance in each community.

To practice CSCs, the community will first be informed of the purpose and benefits of the CSCs. After that, the study team will generate performance criteria for benchmarking the quality of services that can be used by the villagers for monitoring and evaluating the quality of public services. The criteria are 1) being the most critical, and 2) having the highest potential be solved by the cooperation between public sectors and the people in approximately 5–6 months. Results from the assessment will be listed in different lines on the community board. The participants will be asked to put a sticker on the issue on the board to present their opinion. In order to analyze the data from CSCs, the number of stickers on each issue will be used to indicate the performance/quality of



public services and the argment of change that needs to be done. The top three most serious issues will be presented in the next public meeting.

Step 4: Tool #3 Budget Literacy (BL): Budget literacy is one of the crucial tools in this study. It can be considered as one of the vital forms of education. This is because, in providing public service delivery, or even in individual's everyday life, BL plays an important part as a key aspect in decision making on every concern (Leumann, Heumann, Syed, & Aprea, 2016; Mihalčová, Csikósová, & Antošová, 2014). It is believed that knowledge and understanding of governmental financial policy and its implication on citizens is very important for people to realize the limitation (if any) of the government sector. More importantly, the ability of citizens to critically examine service providers can be promoted through budget education.

In practice, specific service agencies who are in charge of selected issues will be invited to participate in a meeting since they need to be completely informed. The goal is to persuade the agencies to discuss, respond, and propose possible solutions to the problems. It is possible that service agencies may have a negative reaction with the results of the GSA and the initiative of CSCs. The team, therefore, will try to create a friendly atmosphere and promote collective responsibility and partnerships from all stakeholders. Also, all stakeholders will be invited to join the meeting since making better public service is a collective responsibility for all. It is hoped that this collective cooperation will encourage and ensure better changes in every village.

To practice BL, the service agencies will be asked to inform the public about their current budget. Important questions such as the possibility of the provider to spend more on making better public services, the obstacles for the provider to work more productively, or if the problem be solved more rapidly, can be raised during the meeting. The agencies will be asked to respond to all raised questions. In order to analyze data from practicing BL, content analysis is used to analyze responses from all meeting participants. The analysis will focus on using the stories, questions and answers, and dialogue shared by both citizens and agencies sides.

It is expected that, through non-confrontational dialogue, trust among the government agencies and the public can be developed, which in turn, may encourage mutual collaboration, cooperation, and support within the communities (Delhey & Newton, 2003; Suksawas et al., 2018). As a result, those obstacles may be turned into organized and meaningful dialogue with the public. Public support from various resources could be taken into consideration in promoting better change. The partnership can form a core action plan made up of representatives of public agencies that work closely with other stakeholders. Thus, the action plan could be very beneficial since it could indicate what, when, and how the agencies and the public can play a part to achieve their goals.

Step 5: Tool #4 Action: Stakeholders with different knowledge, abilities, experiences, skills, and resources are expected to work closely together so that everyone can make an important contribution to a common benefit. This stage of action will encourage and ensure broad participation in implementation and include provisions to ensure that every sector receive a fair share of the benefits that arise from said implementation. Furthermore, and more importantly, it is the step that reaffirms that everyone is important in building a society of mutual trust and support.

Step 6: Group Meeting for Collectively Identify Outcomes and Impacts: After the action step, all stakeholders will be invited to join a group meeting. The research team will conduct a reflection meeting for four purposes which are 1) to gauge the efficacy and impact of the study, 2) to evaluate the study's both short and long-term outcomes, 3) evaluate how much (if any) of the changes observed in the quality of public service delivery occurred, and 4) to discuss results with stakeholders, uncover, and document their best practices.

Results

In the process of team building, the research team held meetings in Nong-Or SAO and all nine villages. The team presented and discussed the significant, objectives, framework, methodology, and tools of the project with the attendees. Nong-Or SAO and the local villagers were very active and were more than willing to take up the challenge and start working on this project. Members of the working teams were carefully selected and prepped. The “team spirited” atmosphere among the participants was created through friendly dialogue. The research team convened meetings to discuss the information and establish a friendly “team spirited” atmosphere with the administrators and staff of Nong-Or SAO and was able to set up AWG in all villages (see the following figures)



Figure 2 Discussion with Administrators and Staff of Nong-Or SAO.



Figure 3 Setting up AWG in the Villages.

It was revealed that by implementing GSA, CSCs, BL and Action, the findings positively improved quality of life of the people in all nine villages. The figures below presents a brief picture of each process.



Figure 4 The Process of CSCs in Village 2.



Figure 5 The Budget Literacy (BL) Process in Village 3: The Agencies were Asked to Respond to All Raised Questions in the Meeting.



Figure 6 Samples of Action in Village 1: Water Management.



Figure 7 Samples of Action in Village 7: Electricity.



Figure 8 Samples of Action in Village 8: Water Management.



Figure 9 Samples of Action in Village 9: Health Services.



Figure 10 Group Meeting for Collectively Identifying Outcomes and Impact.

Nevertheless, in general, the results of implementing GSA, CSCs, BL and Action of all villages can be clearly shown in the Table 1 as followed.

Remark:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 = Water Management | 2 = Drugs | 3 = Quality of Primary School |
| 4 = Waste Management | 5 = Health Service | 6 = Electricity |
| 7 = Saving Fund | 8 = Agricultural Problems | 9 = Career Problems |
| 10 = Public Information Assessment | | |

Table 1 Results of GSA, CSCs, BL and Action in All Nine Villages

Village	Results from GSA					Results from CSCs			Results from BL		Results of Action to Solve the Selected Problem
	Rank of Selected Problems					Rank of Selected Problems			Final Selected Problem	Specific Issue	
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd			
1	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	4	1	Every water valve was highly damaged as it had been used for over 30 years. Turbid water had coliform bacteria and physical coliform bacteria.	The water management boards from both Village 1 and 2 have implemented a system-wide water valve change. Water quality problems have been solved by using alum in larger quantities for suspended sedimentation and by calculating the use of a solution of chlorine-lime solution put into a clear water tank appropriately to kill bacteria in the water. In addition, the board will use an effective filter to filter. They are going to wash, clean and change the sand regularly.
2	1	6	5	2	7	1	2	6	1	Village water supply is unclean. There is a high bacteria value in water.	



Table 1 (Cont.)

Village	Results from GSA					Results from CSCs			Results from BL		Results of Action to Solve the Selected Problem
	Rank of Selected Problems					Rank of Selected Problems			Final Selected Problem	Specific Issue	
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd			
3	8	3	2	5	9	8	9	2	8	There is insufficient water for agriculture.	When water shortages occur in the dry season, water-electricity users in Nong-Or Sub-district will work together to slow down the flow of the Yom River by sharing budgets from all members. There was a suggestion for Nong-Or SAO to submit a letter to the Sukhothai Provincial Irrigation Office requesting to publicize the administration of the opening and closing of the water gate of Saphan Chan Beach to Nong-Or SAO. The water management committee and the public came together to solve the problem of the water gutters to be cleaned and always ready to be used.
4	8	6	4	7	5	8	6	4	6	People were not able to pay for electricity at the office.	The Nong Or SAO, in collaboration with the Non-formal Education Organization, educated people on how to use the application to help people pay their electricity bills themselves.
5	9	6	7	4	8	9	6	4	9	People needed to increase income for their family since being farmers have uncertain incomes.	Nong-Or SAO organized a broom making training project for the villagers so that they can earn more money.
6	5	1	6	7	8	1	5	6	1	There was insufficient water during the dry season. The bacteria value in the tap water was higher than the standard.	To solve the problem of water shortage, the Water Management Board has conducted drilling for groundwater wells. The committee has resolved the problem of high bacteria tap water by adding chlorine in the tap water and requesting aid from the Provincial Waterworks Authority of Si Satchanalai.



Table 1 (Cont.)

Village	Results from GSA					Results from CSCs			Results from BL		Results of Action to Solve the Selected Problem
	Rank of Selected Problems					Rank of Selected Problems			Final Selected Problem	Specific Issue	
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	1 st	2 nd	3 rd			
7	6	10	1	5	8	6	10	1	6	There were frequent power outages, and insufficient electricity during public events.	<p>The provincial electricity authority has undertaken to fix the electricity outages and reported to Nong-Or SAO. Nong-Or SAO already acknowledged the operation results and has reported to the public.</p> <p>To solve the problem of insufficient electricity, the village committee has supported a budget request for an electricity pole installation. In addition, Nong-Or SAO has also supported electrical wires and lamps.</p>
8	1	6	3	5	7	1	6	5	1	People asked the Water Supply Committee to clarify monthly income and expenses regarding village water supply. People needed a solution to the water transfer system.	<p>Nong-Or SAO has adjusted the budget report form by requiring every village committee to report monthly income and expenses, and must report to Nong-Or SAO. The SAO has coordinated with contractors to accelerate the leveling process. This is because the area for supporting the water supply system in the village is higher than the sewer. The contractor accelerated the process of limiting waste and cleaning the entire plumbing system.</p>
9	5	8	10	3	7	5	8	10	5	The elderly need facilities and exercise equipment.	<p>The village header and village volunteers donated old bikes and old iron for the village committee. The committee then has made exercise equipment at the multi-purpose area next to the multi-purpose building of the village.</p>

Discussion

According to the results of the study, it can be argued that if the study carefully designs its methodology by employing the idea of deliberative democracy as a central principle of the study, the study's process and tools were conducted through the meaningful collaboration by various sectors in the communities, the research could make a better change for all villagers. As it is clearly presented in this study, the problems of insufficient water, unhealthy drinking water, career supplement requirements, frequent power outages, and facilities and exercise equipment demand have been successfully acknowledged, discussed, and resolved by genuine active cooperation through the



process of the study. The results of this study raise three central arguments. This first one is that deliberative democracy that focuses on discussion and friendly discourse are very crucial for the process and output of the decision-making is confirmed by this study. Stakeholder agreement and cooperation are essential to effectively solving problems within the villages. If all participants are encouraged to participate in local social issues through dialogue and discussion, the outcome would be beneficial to all. The second argument is that public participation provides participants with various valuable skills and educates them in the political process. The findings make clear that public involvement enables public service providers to plan services that better meet the demands and expectations of the villagers, prioritize services more efficiently, employ limited resources more efficiently, and more importantly, foster collaboration between state agencies and villagers. If the villagers are invited to participate in the process of a collective problem, the stage of addressing and managing a group of stakeholders and end-users can be made possible. Consequently, it is possible that the agencies can inform all stakeholders and establish participation as a relevant activity to make public service delivery better. The last key argument is that the scale of participation matters. Participation in a large-scale public service projects like provincial, regional, and national may be very difficult for many Thai people. Nevertheless, if the scale has been made smaller to the level of village or community, by employing proper tools, it may encourage greater public contribution. This is because people may feel more comfortable offering suggestions and working with people who are familiar and can be trusted.

Conclusion and Suggestions

As mentioned, this research focuses on employing the principle of deliberative democracy as a framework for conducting research to create a joint resolution needed to solve problems in nine village in Nong-Or SAO. The findings show that deliberative democracy can help all stakeholders in society have equal opportunities to participate in discussions, collaboration, and action to solve problems based public suggestions. The problems, consequently, have been solved through the cooperation of government agencies and people in the area. Positive changes in the community therefore occurred. One suggestion that can be made is if deliberative democracy could be applied in other areas with different socioeconomic and cultural contexts. It may allow people in other areas to gain experience in managing community problems. This may result in the community being able to solve their problems on their own with concrete results in a sustainable manner.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest, or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.



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