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# Disaster governance and the scalar politics of incomplete decentralization: Fragmented and contested responses to the 2011 floods in Central Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the politics of scale as a framework to examine how decentralization reforms and the associated power relations between government agencies at different levels affected disaster risk outcomes in Thailand, particularly during the 2011 floods in Central Thailand. It argues that Thailand's decentralization has been incomplete due to the retention of power and resources by central bureaucrats and the continued weak capacity of local administrative organizations (LAOs). In addition, the country's overall fragmented and politically polarized governance has hindered policy coherence at all levels, including the local level. Incomplete decentralization alongside persistent fragmentation along ministerial and sectoral lines has undermined disaster governance and distributed risks unevenly and unfairly. The governance weaknesses visibly materialized during the 2011 floods. Except for the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), LAOs once again had insufficient capacity to effectively respond to the floods and were given insufficient assistance by the central government. The central government sought to monopolize power, did not consult local communities, had limited capacity to enforce all of its decision, distributed risks unevenly, and overall performed poorly. Similarly, the BMA dominated other much smaller local government units within and beyond its formal boundaries.



## 1. Introduction

A common view in international discussions is that there is a need to further decentralize disaster risk reduction (DRR). The Hyogo Framework for Action encourages governments to "*recognize the importance and specificity of local risk patterns and trends, [and] decentralize responsibilities and resources for disaster risk reduction to relevant sub-national or local authorities, as appropriate*" (UNISDR, 2005, 6). The expected advantages of decentralization, in general, include: improved efficiency, as local governments can be more responsive to needs of local residents; more equitable access; and improved downward accountability, political engagement, and community participation (Faguet, 2014). The latter requires decentralization, as we define it, to be not just an administrative or fiscal redistribution to local levels, but also a devolution of political decision-making power (c.f. Litvack, Seddon, & Ahmad, 1999). Greater local participation in decisions is expected to lead to more appropriate and sustainable DRR interventions (Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004). A multi-country comparison of disaster losses found that those with more decentralized governments had fewer fatalities (Skidmore & Toya, 2013).

Empirical research, however, suggests that the expected benefits of decentralization for DRR, especially in the case of flooding, are not always forthcoming. There are several reasons. First, countries often devolve responsibilities but not skills or human and financial resources. Flood disaster legislation in Vietnam, for instance, acknowledges the importance of local communes in disaster responses and DRR, but an analysis of its implementation found a lack of training, and of technical and financial support, from the central level to the local levels (Chau, Holland, & Cassells, 2014). In Indonesia, decentralization reforms have created opportunities for local authorities to play a greater role in DRR but both local-level capacities and commitment to integrate DRR into development remain major constraints (Djalante, Thomalla, Sinapoy, & Carnegie, 2012). While the framework of a multi-level institutional architecture is now formally in place for disaster preparedness, including

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early warning systems for tsunamis, implementation remains a challenge (Chang Seng, 2013) and there is still limited integration with coastal development laws (Thomalla & Larsen, 2010).

Second, local traps can arise. An overly narrow focus on local perceptions, knowledge and interests may become a barrier to recognizing solutions from other locations or available at other levels (Brown & Purcell, 2005). For example, in Greater London decentralization and increased public consultation—by emphasizing more strongly the views of residents directly affected by floods—led to increased support for conventional structural protection measures, and less consideration of alternative adaptation options and the needs of the wider population (Harries & Penning-Rowsell, 2011). In terms of risks, public opinion pushes for reducing the likelihood of events rather than reducing vulnerabilities or the magnitude of impacts. Likewise, a study of social learning processes around the flood-prone municipalities in Kristianstad, Sweden, concluded that decentralization limited learning at the national level (Johannessen & Hahn, 2013).

Third, decentralization does not mean that other levels, and coordination between them, are no longer important. Consider two examples. Established after major floods in the Rhone River, France, a new partnership brought together local and state authorities to tackle floodplain management at the river level (Guerrin, Bouleau, & Grelot, 2014). However, the initiative was abandoned after five years of negotiation, as a consequence of historical and unresolved politics of scale; different actors were unable to overcome differences in interests and framings of the flood problem. Efforts to introduce river basin management in Mongolia were affected by national-level resistance to decentralization, delays in the wider political process, and politics of scale around delineation of basin boundaries (Houdret, Dombrowsky, & Horlemann, 2014).

These examples suggest that decentralization reforms often struggle to deal with coordination and political issues related to scale. Actors at different levels do not want to be coordinated by someone else—especially if they are a department in another ministry, and thus part of another hierarchy. As a number of scholars have argued, the most effective and equitable form of water governance is polycentric or "decentralization with coordination" (Pahl-Wostl, Lebel, Knieper, & Nikitina, 2012). For a response to be polycentric, groups must have the ability to solve problems on their own that are institutionally enabled in a self-governance system. Polycentricity also denotes many decision-making centers independent of each other but that can make mutual adjustments.

The politics of scale refers to all the different ways actors contest scale choices. Scalar arguments often fit with organizational interests, and the levels in which power are wielded, resources acquired, and to which blame and unwanted responsibilities are shifted (Lebel, Garden, & Imamura, 2005). Arguments about scale are also often about boundaries: what should count as 'in' or 'out'. As Brown and Purcell (2005, 608) argue, "*scalar configurations are not an independent variable that can cause outcomes, rather they are a strategy used by political groups to pursue a particular agenda.*"

Scalar politics are thus both a cause and consequence of decentralization. Decentralization is often a response to pressures from society to "re-level" political and bureaucratic hierarchies. These bottom-up pressures on local governments, especially when they include demands from vulnerable and lower-income groups, are important in building resilience to multiple risks including climate change (Satterthwaite, 2013). Once some decentralization reforms are undertaken, this often creates pushback over the 'right' level for decisions, money allocations, and accountability, and about who should be responsible for what and who should do the work. This resistance is one reason why decentralization is often "incomplete", and why efforts to decentralize disaster management can fail to increase local agency in practice (Blackburn, 2014).

Apart from the politics of scale, when it comes to management of floods, there is also a politics of position (upstream versus downstream) and place (Lebel et al., 2005). Capitals, it is often argued, as economic and political centers, need to be protected in the 'national interest'; in practice, this means that risks and flood waters must be unevenly distributed to other areas (Lebel & Sinh, 2009). This example is also an instance of re-scaling, underlining how spatial politics has multiple dimensions (Görg, 2007), and that space and network hierarchies may be distinct and interact with each other (Bulkeley, 2005).

This paper analyzes the consequences of incomplete decentralization reforms in Thailand for the governance of flood-related disaster risks, with a special emphasis on the role of the politics of scale in the responses to the 2011 floods in Central Thailand. Three specific questions, with an emphasis on factors and processes relevant to the management of flood disasters, are addressed: (1) How has decentralization proceeded in the last two decades? (2) What are the implications of this history for disaster risk management? (3) What role did the politics of scale and decentralization have in the responses to the 2011 floods? The paper uses a mixture of primary and secondary sources, drawing from interviews conducted with government officials, academics, and community leaders from March 2014 to January 2015.

## 2. Decentralization and scalar politics in Thailand

Until the 1970s, Thailand's political system could be described as a bureaucratic polity: bureaucrats and the military dominated the political process and monopolized power at the local level through powerful central government ministries, particularly the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Local administrative organizations (LAOs) were highly centralized, since MOI-appointed provincial governors controlled most of the appointments of local officials.

In the 1970s, three changes occurred that led to the decline of power of the bureaucratic polity and the rise of local politicians-cum-businessmen power (Shatkin, 2004). First, after middle class Thais agitated for change and launched large-scale street protests, the national government increased the budgets of the elected Provincial Administration Organizations (PAO), and established the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA). Second, democratization occurred from this period onwards (until 2014) as the power of parliament grew. Third, industrial transformation in the provinces provided new opportunities for provincial elites to accumulate wealth and translate this wealth into political power (Shatkin, 2004), and also created growing popular demand for local participation and empowerment.

The increased influence of local politicians, combined with democratization, paved the way for Thailand's decentralization reforms in the mid-1990s. Politicians, together with the public, civil society organizations and prominent academics, advocated for decentralization as a way to improve transparency and accountability. These forces for reform were successful in enshrining decentralization in the 1997 Constitution, and in pushing the passage of the Decentralization Act in 1999 (Dufhues, Theesfeld, & Buchenrieder, 2014). However, as the following subsections show, decentralization has not progressed smoothly, and remains incomplete in terms of the transfer of administrative, fiscal, and political responsibility from the central government to subordinate governments.

### 2.1. Administrative decentralization

Similar to the French system, the 75 provincial governments in Thailand are currently organized under two different, parallel