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Failure of public participation for sustainable development: A case study of a NGO's development projects in Chonburi province



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the importance of landscape analysis in designing the public participation process for rural sustainable development projects, using a case study of a non-governmental organization (NGO)'s development projects in Chonburi province. Mixed methods were applied, using focus group and in-depth interview techniques with the former members of a community-based organization and the NGO's staff members, and quantitative data derived from 250 questionnaires which were gathered from the former targeted group of that NGO. The results of this research found that the lack of impact of landscape analysis on the spatial distribution or density of the target population had become a significant intervening obstacle in promoting public participation. It has also resulted in a proportionate discontinuity of the process of the development projects. Specifically, the size of and the space between human groupings, together with the different physical environments of each specific area, have resulted in some targets becoming marginalized from full participation in the development project. Additionally, some other target areas were not willing to join the project due mainly to their way of life and economic conditions, and these two factors are in turn the result of the geographical environment.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, balancing the dynamic interaction between rapid national economic growth and rural community development has been increasingly and considerably of concern to both governmental and non-governmental agencies. Their main purpose is to maintain a state of sustainable development. This has become a substantial scheme of developing countries for their poverty reduction policies (Elliott, 2006; Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005) together with environmental

protection and natural resources management, whereby community engagement in the development processes is encouraged (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005; Lowe, Ray, Ward, Wood, & Woodward, 1998; Oakley, 1995; Pieterse, 1998; Tango International, 2009).

In the case of Thailand, public participation in the development process was initially promoted around 1982, during the launch of the 5th National Economic and Social Development Plan (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board [NESDB], 1982). Most of the targeted communities were poor and marginalized, and differed in landscape, natural resources, and socioeconomic conditions. Not only have government policies been put into practice, but there have also been many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working closely with

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rural people in these areas. A basic philosophy underlying the efforts towards sustainable development of such NGOs is to promote community-driven development with the aim of empowering villagers to be able to control the resources needed for managing their own livelihoods. An ultimate goal is that the target population would be provided with a participation scheme in the development process and thus achieves self-reliance (Suthinarakorn & Traimongkolkul, 2002).

To make the development process sustainable, based on social development principles, public participation is a prime requirement, and the establishment of a community-based organization for the sake of improving the rural people's livelihoods is usually a primary choice (Kates et al., 2005; Leeuwis, 2000; Lowe et al., 1998; Oakley, 1995). Nevertheless, there are several examples showing the abolition of community-based organizations due to the lack of public participation in development projects. The lack of people's interest due to their ways of life, economic conditions, and occupations has always been proposed by many rural development researchers as an important factor (Jaisue, 2014; Mala, Wongpreedee, Thumkosit, & Dhirathiti, 2012; Shigetomi, 2006; Usavagovitwong, Jirawatthvee, & Chairattananondha, 2013). However, as observed, these researchers did not pay enough attention to the essential determinant factors which resulted in such problems. With this argument in mind and applying the landscape analytical approach, the findings of our research on an NGO's rural development project which covers three sub-districts located in Chonburi province, Thailand, discovered a new factor which has become a significant intervening obstacle in promoting public participation. It is that the influence of geographic conditions has affected not only the settlement patterns of the people, but also determines the degree of public participation in the development processes which has resulted in the discontinuity of the development projects. Thus, the objective of this paper was to investigate the importance of landscape analysis in designing the public participation process for rural sustainable development projects. Importantly, due to the interdisciplinary approach of the research, this paper could be useful to both NGOs and government agencies in their efforts to develop other development projects in the future.

Theoretical Principles

There seems to be a dichotomy between the two disciplines when we compare the theoretical foundations and principles of social development with that of geography, even though academics in these two disciplines put enormous effort into studying the interaction between human activities and their environment, or vice versa. In the current state of socioeconomic conditions, which can be seen as much more complex and dynamic in ways that were not evident in the past, interdisciplinary approaches to studying and implementing development projects are widely discussed in both fields (Elliott, 2006; Kates et al., 2005; Pearce & Atkinson, 1998).

Apart from considering the relevant fields to a development area and putting such ideas into practice, what has

been much in debate is to what extent each of the disciplines and approaches should be integrated for implementing a development project in order to achieve the objective of sustainable development (Lowe et al., 1998; Ramsey, Abrams, Clark, & Evans, 2013). With this initial argument, this section provides the analytical factors relating to sustainable development in the course of the intercalation of the nexus between physical landscape and public participation in the development process.

Public Participation

In a literal interpretation of "Our Common Future", a World Commission on Environment and Development report in 1987, the aim was to reduce some kinds of human activity to the extent where they might not affect the surrounding environment and natural resources. Since then, the concept and its meaning as well as a possible mechanism for promoting sustainable development and the forms of indicators for measuring sustainability have repeatedly been deliberated upon, both at national and international levels, from universities to national governments and on the international stage (Elliott, 2006; Kemp, Parto, & Gibson, 2005; United Nations, 2010). Evidence for this could be perceived at the Rio conference in 2012, focusing on institutional arrangements and their capacity to balance economic growth and natural resources, for instance (Clemencon, 2012; Leggett & Carter, 2012).

These debates are directly and indirectly claimed to be the result of non-linear dynamic changes in global and national socioeconomic conditions, as well as globalizing environmental problems and increasing inequalities and poverty (Clemencon, 2012; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). These changes are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and the effects would become a barrier to the development process at the local level and of course sustainability as a result. In this regard, an alternative development has thus been promoted by various agencies, especially by local governments and NGOs. Local community-based organizations, such as community co-ops, occupational groups, and savings groups, are such instruments, aiming at decreasing the impacts that might result from the mainstream globalized world.

This concept has widely been adopted in less-developed and developing societies, from Sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America and to Asian societies (Lowe et al., 1998). A fundamental concept in this is based on the assumption that a top-down approach is not suitable with development constructed from below, as it emphasizes a bottom-up approach with multi-stakeholder decision-making processes. Public participation, as many scholars have argued, is an essential requirement in realizing this concept (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005; Leeuwis, 2000; Lowe et al., 1998; Pieterse, 1998). This is because participation from below would not only loan legitimacy to projects in the eyes of the people who would be affected by the results of such development, but it is also assumed that the results of development projects would more or less meet the needs of them all. With this in mind, projects which involve participation and gain willingness from the people may possibly be sustained.

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