



Social capital, citizen participation in public administration, and public sector performance in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships among social capital, citizen participation, and public sector performance in Thailand. The findings indicate that social networks, a core component of social capital, tend to increase the motivation and ability of Thai citizens to participate in public affairs and thereby tend to increase the effectiveness of public goods provision. Provincial and local authorities do not tend to improve public goods and services a great deal as government resources increase. In Thailand, where the accountability of the public sector is often weak, social capital and citizen participation therefore can improve public sector accountability and performance.

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades, public administration was dominated by a customer-oriented approach associated with the new public management (NPM) doctrine (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Kettl, 2005). As an alternative to the NPM model, Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) and Osborne (2006, 2010) proposed a new public governance (NPG) or new public service (NPS) idea that was based on the concept of democracy and citizen participation as an essential precondition for effective institutional performance. It is argued that horizontal relationships between public administrators and their fellow citizens are necessary to improve public sector performance in the delivery of public services and to increase citizens' satisfaction with the quality of public service (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000: 554–555). Based on democratic values, the NPG approach elevates citizens and civil society to be on par with government officials. Public administration in this context of citizen participation is defined as the interaction of citizens and public administrators and direct participation of citizens in public policy decisions, public service delivery, and quality improvement processes (Callahan, 1982, 2007; Roberts, 2004: 316). In this view, citizens and civil society are regarded as an integral part of the governance process. Thus, it has been increasingly proposed that public administration is moving from “the government age” to a system of governance in which public authorities are no longer

solely responsible for the provision of public services; citizens and social organizations have the capacity to participate in public administration and co-produce public services (Osborne, 2006: 381).

Citizen participation is particularly important at the subnational level, concerning both deconcentrated units of the central state and decentralized local authorities. State and local governments have to be interested not only in improving their performance but also in maintaining public confidence in the implementation of public services. In this context, citizen participation is a very important resource in terms of improving service delivery. The incorporation of citizens into public administration strengthens the effectiveness of public service delivery because the adoption and implementation of new decisions will be better adjusted to the respective local problem situations. Similarly, Flanklin and Ebdon (2002: 389) have argued that if the government does not know what service consumers want, it is unlikely that they can meet the needs of citizens. In sum citizen involvement in administration is supposed to reflect the opinions and needs of the people that the government should serve.

Turning to Thailand, citizen participation in public administration has been encouraged by decentralization reforms. The first serious efforts at political and fiscal decentralization are generally attributed to former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's first administration, 1992–1995 (Krongkaew, 1995). However, the main push for substantial and continuous decentralization was provided by the implementation of the 1997 Constitution. As a result, important duties and responsibilities were assigned to local administrative bodies. The decentralization process in Thailand is therefore appropriately understood as a fundamental institutional change

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to create options for local participation and to increase downward accountability. Certainly both upward and downward accountability mechanisms are important for successful decentralization (Agrawal & Ribot, 1991: 475). Public officials are upwardly accountable to their superiors in a hierarchy and downwardly accountable to the citizen. Veron, Williams, Corbridge, and Srivatava (2006) showed that upward accountability was as necessary to control for corruption as was downward accountability. However, the present study is particularly interested in downward accountability. In Thailand, local authorities consist of two branches; the council (monitoring branch) and the committee (operating branch). Both are mainly composed of elected representatives, and they constitute the main sources of local accountability. In addition to elections, other accountability measures include the rights to access information on local management practices and the right to impeach local representatives and executives. Apart from electing local representatives, the major entry point for citizen participation is the preparation of local development plan. In the local development planning process, local authorities are required to establish civic forums at the village and the Tambon (sub-district) levels. These forums will send delegates to participate in the local development planning process (Chaowarat, 2010: 106). Another form of citizen participation is the provincial-level civic assemblies, which bring various social groups together, such as government officials, members of civil society, academics, and representatives from the private sector. These assemblies fulfill tasks similar to the civic forums but at the provincial level. Though their resolutions do not have binding authority, they nevertheless provide popular input into the administrative planning procedure (Connors, 2007: 226). However, not all civic forums and assemblies function as envisaged (Chaowarat, 2010: 98–106; Suwanmala, 2007:144–145). While civic forums can be essential channels for citizen participation, much depends on the willingness of public officials and villagers constructively to implement this mandate. In their study of civic engagement in one local community in Northeastern Thailand, Dufhues, Theesfeld and Buchenrieder (2015: 802) found that local officials did not call meetings of the civic forum meeting and its members did not complain. Some members did not even notice that the meetings did not take place. Punyaratabandhu and Unger (2009: 282) also point out that, due to the hierarchical structure of Thai society, critical interlocutors vital for holding public authorities accountable tend to be rather weak. Punyaratabandhu (2008: 10) adds that most urban residents do not participate, for instance, in activities related to community development planning. Additionally, many civic forums were established in an undemocratic manner (usually set up by local authorities) which tends to minimize the influence of local residents (Manor, 2004: 194).

Conventional studies on citizen participation in Thailand tend to emphasize the limitations of civic engagement in public administration. However, recent years have seen a growing numbers of scholars who stress the increasing emergence of civil society groups in Thailand, and the increasing demand for greater participation in public administration by these groups. Shatkin (2004: 14), for example, points out that the recent increase in demand for citizen participation in Thailand was largely driven by emergent civil society networks, which saw it as a mean to promote transparency and downward accountability in government, and to overcome the power of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. Moreover, in their study of social capital in Thailand, Wun-Gaeo, Jumnianpol, and Nuangjammong (2014: 99–100) found that the majority of rural Thai people tended increasingly to participate in voluntary organizations and networks, such as agricultural groups, community business groups, micro finance groups, health promotion networks, and elderly development networks. Many of these voluntary organizations and networks were set up by local or

provincial governments or received financial support from public funds. Increasingly, the Thai government recognized these civic organizations and networks as partner for promoting development (Krueathep, 2004: 217; Wun-Gaeo et al., 2014: 104). With the 2014 military coup in Thailand, it comes as no surprise that the current Thai government does not have civic engagement, including local government support more generally (Unger and Mahakanjana, 2016: 185), high on their agenda. Yet, after a return to more democratic conditions (elections are anticipated for February 2019) civil society should regain its potential of being a powerful means to increase citizen-government accountability and to improve public sector performance.

This paper shares the spirit of these recent scholars. In contrast to the earlier studies that emphasized the limited capability of the Thai citizens to participate in public affairs, the present study aims to show that civil society networks can be an essential channel for citizen participation and thereby can improve public sector performance. In order to scale up the civil society networks and citizen participation in public administration, it is important to identify the connection between civil society networks and citizen participation and to explore their potential effects on public sector performance. The findings from this study should help to contribute to a better understanding of the relationships among social capital, citizen participation, and public sector performance in Thailand and beyond.

According to social capital¹ theory (on the characteristics of this concept, see the theoretical framework, below), social capital, including social networks and trust, can foster public administrators to work closely with citizens and thereby can increase public sector performance. Putnam's seminal work, *Making Democracy Work* (1993: 123), demonstrates that "citizens who are active in local organizations, even non-political ones, tend to take greater interest in public affairs. This interest renders the government more accountable to the citizens." Increasing evidence also indicates that social capital is critical for increasing the willingness and capacity of government officials and the general public to work together to address common needs. According to the World Bank (2015a: 1–2), social networks and trust facilitate valuable information exchange and thus reduce the costs of extensive regulations and enforcement. The existence of social networks, therefore, should increase the likelihood of participation and cooperation by building trust and fostering shared norms between government officials and citizens. Social capital, thereby, can increase institutional performance by increasing the effectiveness of public service provision (Gibson, 2001:55–56; Keefer & Knack, 2005: 710; Putnam, 2002).

To date, research on social capital in developing countries, published in leading interdisciplinary development journals, has primarily focused on the effects of social capital (social networks and trust) on development outcomes such as resources management (Pham & Talavera, 2018), inequality and poverty reduction (Fafchamps, 2006; Fukuyama, 2001; Zhang, Zhou, & Lei, 2017), public health (Miller, Scheffler, Lam, Rosenberg, & Rupp, 2006), community development (Adhikari & Goldey, 2010; Narayan & Pritchett, 1999), and environmental outcomes (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Although there has been an increasing number of research that examines the links between social capital and public sector performance (Coffe & Geys, 2005; John, 2005; Knack, 2002; Rothstein, 2001), most of it tends to study these linkages at the macro-level. Relatively little is known about how social capital affects motivation and capability of individual citizens to

¹ Social capital refers to the networks and norms that enable collective action. It encompasses the relationships and customs that shape social interactions. Social networks (collections of individuals that promote and protect personal relationships) and social trust (collective attitudes that foster greater cohesion and more robust collective action) are normally used to operationalize social capital.

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