



# FACTORS AFFECTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THAILAND'S POLICY TO DECENTRALIZE GOVERNMENT

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## Abstract

Thailand's main purpose of the decentralization policy was to balance the development of human, social, economic and environmental resources as to achieve sustainable people-centred development. With this, the policy required to promote the role of administrators at the local level so that they could enhance their capability and increase the power of local government. Consequently, the revision of the Thai Constitution in 1997 included decentralization as a means to increase the effectiveness of local government as well as to promote the transmission of power to the local people in order to encourage greater local participation in policy making. The consequence of this has an effect on the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002-2006) to promulgate and promote the development of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) with the purpose of strengthening the local dimension of government.

This study focuses on factors influencing the capacity of the SAO staff to determine and implement the policies set out by central government under decentralization. There are 45 government agencies at three different levels (central, provincial and local levels) both in Bangkok and Chiang Rai province as the samples.

This study found that the SAO staff have limited capability to achieve the government's decentralization policy due to several factors such as a limited understanding of a core concept of decentralization, the old bureaucratic systems that continued to prevail and left the local governance to be overseen partly by appointed government officials and lack of supports provided by the central government. With these circumstances, the SAOs had no alternative but only relied heavily on central government for a wide range of matters. From this, the SAO staff not only had limited opportunity to participate in decentralization, but also lacked of capability in responding to the central government's decentralization policy effectively. As a result, a degree of success of Thailand's decentralization is average.

This study concludes that the government must concern about problem regarding the readiness of the SAO staff to decentralization as well as to eliminate problems arising from adherence to the old bureaucratic systems at local, provincial and central government levels if the policy of decentralization is to succeed (King Prajadhipok's Institute. 2002, p 91.).

While central government must ensure the decentralization policy could implement through to the end, staff at all levels, especially at local level must be enhanced to respond to the policy and would not lead the policy implementation process a failure. The government, moreover, needs to ensure that all the supports are provided to the SAOs for the policy implementation process if the intended goals are to be achieved.



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**Keywords:** decentralization, Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), National economic and social development plan, ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches

## **Introduction**


The Decentralization in Thailand was first introduced in 1897 in response to the colonization of its neighboring countries as well as a means of strengthening and maintaining control of central government. As a result, the Thai national administrative system has been characterized by a ‘top-down’ approach and a strong central government function because the development of Thailand’s local government has continued to rely on central government (Likhit Dhiravegin. 1996, p. 255).

After a political transforming from an absolute monarchy to a democratic government in 1932, intergovernmental relations in Thailand’s political system have been dominated by central government. In the notion of that matter, while central government still played an important role in national administrative system, local government was seen to be only a subordinate unit as local government has less opportunity to respond to local problems and provide goods and services to the locality. With this issues, the arguments about the perspectives of the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches regarding Thailand’s decentralization policy was concerned because they were both core functions of policy making and implementation. (Saetren Harald. 2005, p. 572-575). To say in other words, the ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches are key factors ensuring the success or failure of policy implementation. (Susan Barrett and Colin Fudge. 1981, p. 210).

During the 1990s, through its national planning process, central government has initiated greater decentralization and the devolution of more power to local government. Specifically, an amendment to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand in 1997 required the transmission of power to communities to enable greater participation in policy making at local level. Consequently, Subdistrict Administration Organizations (SAO) was established in 1995 and became one of the key mechanisms in the attempt to promote government decentralization. (Woothisarn Tanchai. 1997, p. 2).

Since 1995, the SAOs which are the lowest level of local government have been given greater autonomy to make and implement decisions, and are expected by central government to perform the government’s responsibilities more effectively. However, even though these changes were significant, there was the potential for the policy not to be implemented as intended. This occurred because there were implementation gaps that were likely to be caused by deficiencies in the capacity of SAOs to achieve the goal of decentralization.

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This study was an inquiry into the Thai government support for decentralization and its endeavors to implement its decentralization policy. This study also assessed the implementation of decentralization, the experience of decentralization and the opportunities for participation in local government to devolve governmental power through the case study of the Chiang Rai SAO.

## **Methodology**

The study was carried out in Chiang Rai province, Thailand. Two categories in data collection used in this research were: 1) primary data that was obtained from in-depth interviewing of a focus group with key personnel on the following topics related to governmental policy: the goals of policy implementation, the effectiveness of this policy in solving a problem, the consequences that will likely follow the implementation of this policy, potential problems with policy implementation at the grass root level, and opinions about a SAO's policy implementation. And 2) secondary data that was obtained from both English and Thai published material, including books, articles and government documents. In addition, there were two different forms of analysis proposed: 1) A quantitative form including an in-depth interview, focus group interviews and observation staff in a SAO, 2) A qualitative form made up of questionnaires.



The populations were six Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAO). The purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques were used in order to allow for a comparison of three older SAOs which established in 1994-1995 and three newer SAOs which established between 2002-2006. Further, in order to allow for the consideration of the impact of the size and scale of the organization on the implementation of the plan to decentralize government functions, a selection of small and medium SAOs were selected.

To recruiting participants, the interviews were conducted with two different groups: 1) focus group participants consisting of six different focus groups from the six SAOs. Focus group participants consisted of those who held positions as 1) community leaders, 2) administrative leaders, and 3) staff in policy and planning roles in SAOs, and 2) the in-depth participants that were identified and drawn government agencies who held positions of 1) higher authorities and government agencies, 2) community leaders, 3) administrative leaders, and 4) staff in policy and planning roles in SAOs.

## **Result**

From the study, three main factors are to be discussed:


### **1. Lack of readiness in decentralization**

At central level, six research participants at central level stated that after the promulgation of the decentralization policy addressed in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2540 (1997) and the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002-2006), the Thai government's paid more attention to decentralizing decision-making powers to its local level. However, all six participants thought the implementation of the government's decentralization policy had been rushed. While the government at higher levels (central and provincial) could respond easily, the SAO staff frequently found their obligations very difficult to perform.

Regarding the capability of the SAO staff to implement the decentralization policy, two of the six participants mentioned that the central government had failed to concern that the government officers and staff at local government level lack of readiness to respond the decentralization policy. In addition, four participants thought that the SAO staff had limited capability as they had inadequate understanding a concept of decentralization and required supervisions and training in specific areas that would enhance their obligations.

At provincial government level, all four of participants said decentralization was a significant approach to deliver communities a rapid service. While, three of the four considered that there were improvements after the decentralization policy was promoted, one participant saw that there was no much improvement as there were several problems inhibiting the decentralization policy unsuccessful.

According to their opinions, all four participants agreed that the SAO staff still had limited capability to fulfill the decentralization policy. They required more experiences to work with other government officials. While one participant said, it was essential for the central government to ensure the government officials at central and provincial levels were good role models for the SAO staff to follow. Another participant added that central government must be aware of how the SAO staff work to make certain the decentralization policy implementation was in the right track.



At local level, 45 participants who faced problems about decentralization policy the most stated that they are pleased that the government realized how significant decentralization was. In accordance with the participants at local level, ten of them considered decentralization as a significant method to develop the locality because the local community developed faster. And the rest of them, however, went on to mention that under limited number of experienced staff who could work well under the government's decentralization policy, the SAO staff found it very difficult to achieve the policy implementation process. They also explained further that on the one hand the SAO play more vital role at local government level by perform several transformed obligations from the central government and there was a promotion of increasing people's participation within community and a political demand for self-governing bodies at the subdistrict level. On the other hand, there remained several problems according limited capability of the SAO staff and overlap in Thailand's three layers of administrative structure, especially, between the provincial administration and the local administration. In addition, several participants mentioned that there were limited amount of government officials who understand deeply about the core concept of decentralization, especially those government officials who work at central and provincial level and the SAO staff at local level. As a result, there always face difficulty in responding the decentralization policy because the government officials at different levels understood their role under the decentralization policy differently.

## 2. Influences of the hierarchy system and bureaucratic polity in national administration to a government at local level

Because the SAOs are required to work with other organizations at different levels, it is necessary that government officials at all level have good working system. In this study, participants were asked to describe how the process of policy implementation had worked regarding cooperation between the SAOs and other government organizations. The following are what participants stated:

At central level, participants identified that several factors such as complexity of working process, hierarchy and bureaucratic system cause a delay of working process. As they said, if the central government could eliminate this problem, the SAO could work much faster.

This is supported by participants at provincial level as they saw the same problem that complexity of working process and the hierarchical system are main factors influencing the SAO's workings delay. Since the SAO was a foundation unit of the local government level, it could not avoid the working line with governments at higher level. However, one of participant said even though hierarchical system could cause problem to the implementation of decentralization, the degree of hierarchy between provincial and local government was less than between central and local government.

In the notion of the SAOs, seven participants mentioned that they sometimes had difficulties working with governments at higher level, especially provincial level. They explained that even though the central government promulgated the decentralization policy and the SAO played more important role in national administrative system, several SAO staff still lack of knowledge and experience working under administrative rules and regulations issued by central government. From this, there was several times that the SAO staff required more time to interpret important contents and confirm with other relevant organizations before working. As a result, there always a possibility that their works would delay than a due date.

### 3. Lack of supports and resources provided by the central government

The issue of lack of support and resources provided by the central government were raised as one of factors influence the decentralization policy to be success or failure.

While participants at central level concern that central government needed to be aware of how well the SAO could make use of the provided supports and resources, it was necessary that central government must provide local government sufficient supports and resources. For instance, central government must provide sufficient revenue so that the SAOs could carry out their policy, or central government must provide the SAOs supervisions and trainings so the staff could enhance their work and gain more experience.

In the case of provincial level, all participants agreed that central government must ensure that local government had sufficient supports and officials at local level could respond well to the demands of decentralization policy. One participant added that rather than paying attention to the scheme to develop decentralization at local level, central government must take into account that there were sufficient supports, especially sufficient autonomy and mentoring system. Therefore, the SAOs would consult when they face any difficulty during working.

Concerning local government level, participants, indeed, concerned very much about an issue of insufficient revenue. As one participant said revenue allocated to SAOs was insufficient. The government did not provide sufficient revenue or grants-in-aid for the tasks. Even though SAOs could earn their own funds, it was quite inadequate for them to perform their obligations. In addition, however, even though the SAO receive limited revenue, the SAOs could request assistant from other local organization for their support so that their obligation could continue through to the end.


In addition, another issue the participants revealed was an imbalance of the numbers of the staff and responsibilities the SAO required to perform. As they explained, the SAO only had limited numbers of staff comparing to numerous responsibilities that they had to perform. Since the SAO receive limited revenue, therefore, they had to distribute the revenue to ensure that all works would be implemented. Consequently, SAO staff could not put the decentralization policy into practice effectively.

### **Conclusion**

For decades Thailand always paid more attention to centralization because of its political approach. However, through the national planning process, central government has initiated decentralization and more power to local government. From this, an effort to establish decentralization is still being considered and will take time. This is not only for staff at a local level, but also for people who are a part of society as well.

Although government officials working at the local level remain accountable to higher officials in the system, it does not mean that a higher-level government is not giving up any of its authority. If government officials do not involve the local people in their decision-making in any way, administrative decentralization is not of much use. In order to achieve a degree of genuine decentralization, it is important for local people to be consulted in some way, especially when major decisions affecting them are being made.

In accordance with factors influence a capability of the SAO staff to implement the decentralization policy as mention above, most of participants, especially those who work at higher level (central and provincial levels) agreed that decentralization policy initiated by



central government was too rushed and there was no readiness of government official, especially those who work at local level to respond the policy effectively. In addition, the government must take into account for providing all supports in every way as this could enhance and assist the local government, the SAOs, to put the policy into practice effectively.

Moreover, the sustainability of the decentralization policy implemented by the national government also required to be reconsidered. This is because government official and staff who work local level are still being appointed by the central government rather than to the local community. As a result, if a sustainable development takes place and people in a local area realize and participate together in steering and implementing development activities, an effort to establish a bottom-up approach which allow local government to have more opportunity to participate in national administrative system and to develop a community will begin

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