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Promoting active citizenship in the community: A case study of Nong Sarai, Phanomthuan District, Kanchanaburi, Thailand

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Abstract

This research seeks to explore mechanisms and factors contributing to active citizenship in the Nong Sarai community, Phanomthuan District, Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Nong Sarai is a unique test case as the community suffered serious debt and closed between 2002 and 2005. Community leaders adopted a strategy that allowed the community and its members to alleviate the debt, establishing a self-reliant community structure. Research employed a qualitative research method, including documentary research and field research, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory observation. The research found the nature of active citizenship in Nong Sarai. The contributing factors include (1) Context-community active citizenship; (1.1) The awareness of community problems, (1.2) Effective community leaders, (1.3) Villagers' positive attitude towards the public interest, mutual solutions and trust in leaders, (1.4) Love of community and desire for development. (2) Learning active citizenship; (2.1) Action learning, (2.2) Knowledge management, (2.3) Best practices; (3) Civic competence and knowledge of local community members, and (4) Social outcomes, where local active citizenship results in increased strength and self-reliance in a community.

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Introduction

The promotion of active citizenship is a significant component of public sector reform in the democratic administration. It is a vital component of a functioning democracy. King Prajadhipok's Institute (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2014) suggests that active citizenship is defined as an awareness of rights and duties pertaining to politics and governance, including the active participation in civic politics. Civic politics at the local level works to establish efficient

running of local government, scrutinize political reform, implement social organizational structures, and promote democratic and political literacy. Additionally, active citizenship includes scrutiny of elections and exercising of power by government officials.

Chensantikul (2013) discovered that perception of civic engagement among Thais is significantly polarized. Additionally, there was evidence that local representatives are unable to respond to the needs of their constituents. Though Thailand adopted democratic processes in 1932, the full implementation of democracy has been a slow process, as greater education is needed to inform citizens on their rights and responsibilities to participate in a democratic system (Bureekul, 2014). The Thai political system has undergone significant changes in recent years, often coupled with violent conflict. As a result, the political views of many Thais have

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shifted in favor of greater liberalism, which is evident in the civil sector's urge for political reform and the drafting of constitutional amendments based on expanded public participation (Dissaman, 2014).

The necessity of civic engagement became evident during the 1996 economic crisis in Thailand. This occurred concurrently with the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001), where the “Strong Community” initiative was highlighted. Government and private agencies collaborated to mitigate economic and social issues, with socially focused development programs aimed to strengthen communities. These programs aimed to ensure the readiness of individuals to participate in the economy, social development, and natural resource management for sustainable success (Rodsir, 2011).

A case study of the community Nong Sarai seeks to examine the concept of active citizenship and its underpinning factors in the Nong Sarai community. This study illustrates key factors that make this community a model for self-management and effective governance under the Community Organization Development Institute. Nong Sarai has implemented structures to promote active community engagement among residents. These efforts include programs for civic education, knowledge management through a community charter, collaboration between residents, schools, and temples, as well as local curriculum development, the establishment of a community learning center, and the establishment of financial institutions and various professional groups to promote sustainable and effective self-governance of the community. The village acts as example of a local community that succeeds in self-governance by working to advance the well-being of residents through socially minded policies.

Literature Review

The term ‘active citizenship’ encompasses several definitions. Cruikshank (1994) states that active citizenship encourages less reliance on the public sector, while promoting greater participation in the welfare and services offered by the government. Rose (1996) argues that active citizenship is related to the community by which the government sector acts through communities. Phromkerd (2014) posits that active citizenship occurs when individuals are involved in public activities at all levels of society, from local to national to international. Given these definitions, active citizenship encompasses a willingness to address community problems, willing participation and engaging in self-empowering activities that create positive social change and public policy formation. A society that has active civic participation is one in which citizens feel compelled to be part of policy creation and change as well as cooperative economic endeavors, where emphasis is placed on the larger social benefit as opposed to potential individual gains.

The research conducted by Hoskins (2006) titled, “Measuring Active Citizenship: A Comparison of Current Development in

International Surveys” examines civil participation especially in democracies and active citizenship promotion based on civic education. The research identifies that indicators of active citizenship hinge on civil participation processes in society, community, and political participation in democracy and success or civil competence after learning processes. This research discusses the factors beneficial to active citizenship including knowledge, skills, perspective and personal identity.

Community

Borisudthi (2015) argues that community can be described as those who live in one particular locality of which relation or benefit is shared, where norms or regulations are applied to members. Kaewmano (2015) posits that strong community is derived when people or villagers perform an action to address a community problem. They use local resources and wisdoms, external knowledge, self-determination, local identity and knowledge networks to create a strong and sustainable community. Kaewmano (2015) proposes that a strong community can be identified as people who actively find a solution to a communal problem by sourcing internal and external methods, while adhering to self-reliance for the sake of community survival. Kaewmano (2015) outlines that communities have unity, the potential for self-reliance and life-long learning, stemming from education.

Methodology

The study is based on two research questions: (1) The nature of active citizenship in Nong Sarai and (2) The contributing factors to active citizenship promotion in Nong Sarai. Nong Sarai community is a unique test case as the community suffered serious debt and closed between 2002 and 2005. In this research, the Nong Sarai community was chosen due to evidence of its strength and self-management. Nong Sarai demonstrates a wide array of social capital and resources as foundations for self-development and problem solving. This community illustrates an eagerness to exchange knowledge, embrace new perspectives and values the importance of learning as a means for further advancement and improvement. These social and entrepreneurial ventures fostered a stronger sense of community, while helping to generate income for the community and mitigate debt.

This research adopted a qualitative research methodology. It utilized documentary research, field research, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participatory observation in order to formulate the best practices. Participants in the research were divided into Group 1 and Group 2.

Those allocated to Group 1 participated in in-depth interviews. The interviews sought to investigate the nature and implementation of active citizenship in Nong Sarai. Interview questions were assessed by three experts including the president of the community organization council and a village

headman. Those interviewed included a member of the community organization council, the leader of community exploration before the community's closure, and the individuals who propelled the community.

Those allocated in Group 2 participated in a forum intended to explore the viewpoints of community leaders, representatives and researchers. The forum focused on the administration strategies that promoted self-management in the community. Participants in Group 2 were given a research list of questions. Participants in Group 2 included the president of the community organization council, one vice-president of the community organization council, one village headman, one community organization council member, and one community researcher. The informants were all residents of the community and had worked closely with community leaders in the development of the community's strong social and political structures. The question topics included characteristics of active citizenship in communities, characteristics of public participation, supportive measures by public agencies and non-state networks, and factors of active citizenship promotion in the community. Concerning data collection, the researcher sought approval from the Committee for Research Ethics in Social Sciences at Mahidol University. Accordingly, prior to the interviews, the researcher briefed the participants about the research objectives, the session's duration for all seven key informants, permission to record, questions in the in-depth interviews and the brainstorming questions regarding active citizenship in the Nong Sarai community. The question topics included:

1. Characteristics of active citizenship in communities
 2. Characteristics of public participation
 3. Supportive measures by public agencies and non-state networks
 4. Factors of active citizenship promotion in the community
- Data analysis used content analysis and descriptive data presentation.

Results

The research results are categorized based on the two research questions: (1) The nature of active citizenship in Nong Sarai and (2) The contributing factors to active citizenship promotion in Nong Sarai.

Part 1: The Nature of Active Citizenship in Nong Sarai

The Nong Sarai community is a testament to the power of a strong and active community. The nature of active citizenship can be described as follows:

Awareness of problems faced by community members

Members of the Nong Sarai were aware of the issues faced. When the community was shut down between 2002 and 2005 due to overwhelming debt, the root causes of the financial problems were first addressed. The village also

conducted a community survey in which the leaders observed the community activities from the outside. The village leadership was vital to the implementation of this debt-free solution:

Closing the village means to close success and we can gain nothing. We applied positive aspects from role model villages such as Mai Rieng to our own community. We observed a serving campaign too. At first, our community members had no idea what this community plan was for. It seemed to be time-wasting. But due to leaders' strength, the plan was realized and put into use... (Informant Group 1)

Group solution unity

As community members realized the impact of debt, they developed an attitude that focused the public to find a solution in collaboration with community leaders. The Nong Sarai Learning Center, Good Deed Bank, professional groups and the Community Organization Council operated to accommodate the exchange of opinions and knowledge and develop solutions on the 25th of every month:

One of the community's priorities is child and youth strength activities (under the Human and Environmental Development Group), especially in education. The community collaborated with houses, temples and schools to develop local curriculums with financial aid offered by the Local Subdistrict Administration Organization. For this reason, a local culture course was introduced at every school in the sub-district. Likewise, the 79 Community Organization Councils was established consisting of 9 villages (representatives of health volunteers, philosophers, senior citizen, village leaders, abbots, etc., a total of 79 people) as a forum of opinion exchanges to tackle problems with a meeting on 25th of the month..." (Informant Group 2)

Commitment and leadership strategies

The community leaders demonstrated a profound time commitment, perseverance, and dedication. They held community meetings to develop strategies and plans to close the community, address the debt issue and implement a solution. Furthermore, the leaders recognized the importance of the learning process in the community. They understood the importance of knowledge sharing and strategy adaptation from other successful model communities around strategies for resource management, production control, production planning, spending planning, marketing planning and savings planning, communication skills and technology for greater efficiency in solving problems. Leaders worked to coordinate with agencies and networks such as government agencies, independent organizations, and the civil sector, including individual groups, academics, villagers and foundations:

"We won't implement a single development, or group development, but we focus on mutual development with everyone in the village. We cannot create and complete a mission by ourselves. Rather, we need to call everyone to help tackle an action, try food, take accountability, share and gain benefit. We are a learning and tourist sub-district."

We tackle the flaw of Nong Sarai to prevent an outflux of money. Every village needs to be developed...” (Informant Group 1)

Local pride and desire for local development

Data from the investigation by the community leaders showed that debt was the root cause of the problems of Nong Sarai. A joint decision was made to turn Nong Sarai into a debt-free community, with special attention paid to addressing informal, high-interest debt:

“We are a small sub-district that works together and receives public support. We have implemented coordination with government agencies and communities. Around 2002, government agencies such as BAAC and the public health officers started to develop our community and encouraged community planning. They allowed us to discover the potential of the community and creating community products in every village, fostering a unique identity for the community while promoting love, harmony, unity, and tradition. These are unique in our sub-district...” (Informant Group 1)

Part 2: The Contributing Factors to Active Citizenship Promotion in Nong Sarai

With the use of best practices, the elements leading to active citizenship promotion that correlate to Hoskins’s study include: context, learning active citizenship, knowledge management, civic competence and social outcomes.

“Context includes an awareness of problems in one’s own community. Those who play a key role are the leaders of the villagers who have significant authority. They acted as a driving force and motivation for an awareness of the debt, which was a significant factor exacerbating the poverty of community members. Later, they surveyed every household in the sub-district to accurately identify the pressing problems, their actual cause, the solutions and the common goals of community members. This process illustrates how the community isolated the root cause of their problems, developed a solution and implemented a plan to solve the problem. Ultimately, the villagers’ attitude supported common public interests to solve the problem through their trust in the leader. Before reopening the community in 2006, a huge workshop was held with participation by leaders from many sectors in the community and academics in a bid to mutually analyze problems and formulate ideas as part of a developmental scheme. The important conclusion was that Nong Sarai must be a self-managed community in all facets, from the economy, to society, health, education and morality. During this time, the people of Nong Sarai declared that Nong Sarai must be as great as a country. That is, Nong Sarai should evolve into an integrated community...” (Informant Group 1).

The participatory observation and brainstorming discussion found that important learning process in the community was ‘action learning,’ which involved real-life learning through group activities. Currently, there are 93 groups, which can be

divided into five categories. There are financial groups, welfare activity groups, health activity groups, occupational groups, and human and environmental development activities. All of the entities joined forces in collaboration. All the groups encouraged members to save money and record expenditure. They persuaded people to save more by establishing the “Community Financial Institution”, which acted like a community savings cooperative. It allowed every household member in the community to send a membership fee of 400 baht per year with dividends allocation and also benefits related to birth, death, and illness. Furthermore, community financial institutions accepted members’ savings by offering higher interest rates than banks. The key financial element was to help members borrow money to pay off informal debt with expensive interest rates and then allowing them to pay off these official loans through installments. With this initiative, members living with large amounts of informal debt could be released from financial burdens. Additionally, members could borrow money to invest or do necessary things such as building or repairing a home. A community survey confirmed that Nong Sarai people spent millions of baht for fertilizer and drinking water annually. To lessen this expense, a factory was launched to manufacture organic fertilizers and a drinking water plant was built that provided members with reasonable prices for villagers. In addition, a rice market helped tackle price inflation offered by rice mill operators. Lastly, other vital community infrastructure was built including a garbage bank, a dish-washing detergent factory, a weaving group, a handicraft group, a role model rice mill financed by Rangsit University, a snack factory, “Nong Sarai petrol station”.

The community established the “Nong Sarai Learning Center,” to promote educational advancement and knowledge sharing. One of the community’s priorities included the strengthening of child and youth activities (under the Human and Environmental Development Group), especially in education. To promote morality and ethics, Nong Sarai formulated a healthy community strategy or “Community Charter”, which specifies a number of good qualities along with indicators in which assessors can verify the actual deed of a person. Initially, the community identified nine desirable virtues, but the list later grew to 23. To motivate people to be moral, the community determined that “collecting goodness” by an individual shall be kept at “the Bank of Goodness”. As the mark reaches the specified criteria, those good deeds can be utilized to borrow from community financial institutions. However, the main goal of the Good Bank Project was not lending money without guarantees or losing interest, but rather encouraging people to do good things, to promote happiness and acting for the benefit of the greater good of the community.

Civic competence was demonstrated by strong leadership and civic engagement in the community. People in the sub-district formed a working group called the “Local Committee” consisting of representatives from local agencies,

such as a sub-district councilor, a sub-district secretary, local representatives (Ministry of Interior), a village chief, a village headman and other community leaders. They visited the area in a monthly community meeting to track the progress of the situation, problems, needs, and news. Clear agendas and schedules were implemented on a monthly basis.

The social outcomes of the active citizenship promotion and education can be seen in multiple facets of community life. Since the implementation of intensive self-management over the past 10 years, Nong Sarai has begun to enjoy success in many areas. Household debt, especially informal debt, has been lowered. Nong Sarai society is more peaceful. People in the community do not steal from each other. There are low incidents of violence, motorcycle racing by teenagers, premature pregnancy and the number of drug users has decreased.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results suggest that active citizenship in Nong Sarai community encompasses (1) awareness of common problems of people in the community, (2) cooperation in the finding and implementation of a solution, (3) dedication and efficacy of leaders, (4) love of locality/community, and (5) a desire for local development.

According to the factors and conditions for active citizenship promotion in Nong Sarai community, the community was able to alleviate debt. They also succeeded in establishing groups and associations for career promotion. This community has demonstrated the positive outcomes of cooperation, unity and self-reliance by reducing dependence on public agencies. In turn, this has increased the efficiency of public administration processes by allowing people to think, participate, define and be aware of duties through various skills and learning processes. These mechanisms are the cornerstone of human resource development and are essential mechanisms for individuals to become aware and achieve sustainable development.

For this reason, the researcher suggests that active citizenship promotion is important in communities. Communities should learn from the following lessons of Nong Sarai:

1. Government agencies should be aware of cultivating citizen awareness for youth duties, awareness of one's duty for the larger society.
2. Promoting the role of the civil sector to think, take action, show leadership and dedication.
3. Place importance on the promotion of diverse educational programs for younger generations, including coordination with families, temples, and schools to develop local curriculums.
4. Fostering joint roles between government agencies and the private sector to amplify the participation individuals in the community.
5. Continuously sharing knowledge between communities to promote action-based learning, the establishment of

a learning center for the transfer of knowledge to future generations, the establishment of various professional activity groups and implementing a community mindset geared towards quality of life rather than material possessions.

Nong Sarai community succeeded in its improvement and reinvention due to its leaders, collaborative learning among people in the community and a learning process as part of concrete guidelines. The focus was placed on a practice-based learning, knowledge management and best practices, which have been important factors in the success of the Nong Sarai community.

Additional mechanisms in the success of the community include knowledge management, focus on the quality of life of citizens, encouragement of good deeds through "Bank of Good Deed" and the establishment of various professional groups.

Active citizenship is an important element in the development of human potential in society and a determining factor in a community's capacity for development, which plays a key role in the stability of a democratic system. Understanding of active citizenship promotion in communities can have broader reaching ramifications beyond this small community. It can help individuals, scholars and governments to have greater awareness in order to promote sustainability and reduce societal conflicts on a global scale.

For future research, this study's methodology can be applied in other contexts in communities within Thailand and internationally. Further research can also examine other aspects of promoting active citizenship such as active citizenship indicators in the community, active citizenship with democracy promotion, democratic education in Thailand and citizen education to strengthen active citizens in the community.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interests.

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