



The rural constitution for sustainable Thai rural community development

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Abstract

A rural constitution is a community rule which has been issued in accordance with the general will and agreement of the local people. Its purpose is to seek the cooperation and participation of community members in solving the problems of the community. This research focused on the development of a rural constitution of the Thai rural community, namely, the Banyang community in Wat Bot district in Phitsanulok province, the Lower Northern Region of Thailand. It aimed to search for the model of rural constitutional process for the sustainable development of Thai rural community. A participatory action research approach was applied within the community to observe and participate in the process of developing the rural constitution. The formation of the rural constitution of Banyang Community was initiated by the local and community leaders and evolved from the village rules and developed to be the accepted rural constitution at the sub-district level. The development and implementation of the rural constitution was supported by the Rural Constitutional Council of Banyang sub-district, which is comprised of the local and community leaders, the representatives from the villages, social groups and local organizations. The important factors that were identified as drivers of the sustainable development of the rural constitution and self-governance of the Banyang community were: strong local and community leaders, and the social awareness by the local people of the community's problems.

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Introduction

The research studied the development of rural constitution at Banyang community located in Wat Bot district of Phitsanulok province, the Lower Northern

Region of Thailand. More recently, Banyang community has been regarded as the best model for rural constitution and sustainable community development in Phitsanulok province. It is a medium-sized agricultural community which is comprised of 11 villages located some 42 kilometers from the city of Phitsanulok, the administrative center of the province. The priority demands and issues of the community included a road safety campaign and the prevention of road traffic incidents on the main road

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through Wat Bot district, which is the main connecting road between Phitsanulok province and Uttaradit province. There had been around 460 road accidents each year from 2014 to 2019.

In 2018, 46 road accidents left 56 people injured and 3 dead. The major causes of these road accidents and the injuries and deaths included motor cyclists not wearing a helmet (83.92%) and being under the influence of alcohol (28.57%). Also, deficiencies in road design and facilities at 34 identifiable sites created accident risks. These deficiencies included insufficient lighting, no warning signs at dangerous or high-risk points, poor roads creating safety hazards, and lack of check points. The community leaders and local government acted to reduce the incidence of road accidents and to manage and eradicate the accident risk at the dangerous points in the Banyang community through the implementation of road safety management functions by the Wat Bot district authorities. In 2019, the Banyang community became a major priority area for the road safety project implemented within the Wat Bot district. The community promoted a sustainable model for road safety and accident prevention through a campaign promoting road safety culture and implementing the village regulations for road safety with the goal of enhancing the quality of life and safety of the people in the Banyang sub-district. Also, the community could become the main example and learning center for Phitsanulok province and other rural communities in Thailand (The Road Safety Center of Wat Bot district, 2019).

With these goals in mind, the Banyang community attempted to develop and apply a rural constitution for the implementation of a program to address the road safety issues and to enforce the road safety provisions of the village regulations. However, a lack of an appropriate participatory process and agreement on functions for and by the local rural people prevented a positive contribution to a process of mutual agreement and local innovation for promoting the quality of life and the development of the human capacity of the people in the community. Besides, the community was also looking for local function that could lead to behavioural adjustment and safety environment of community such as the cooperation function among local organizations and the Rural Constitutional Council.

Therefore, this research applied the process of rural constitutional development as the communities' tool in creating the participatory process among rural people and social groups to set up the community agreement and the participatory public policy as well as the local innovation for solving problems particularly road safety and quality

of life of rural people. It also aimed to enhance the community democracy and sustainable self-governed management of Thai rural community.

Literature Review

A rural constitution is the constitution that a community of rural people have designed and agreed upon as the common rules of the community (The Community Organizations Development Institute (Public Organization), 2016). The National Health Commission Office defined the meaning of a rural constitution as the rules, targets, dreams, and agreements that the local people want and agree to have and abide by.

The purpose of having a rural constitution is to achieve a better quality of life and greater happiness of the local people and the community generally. The community rule is regarded as the tool of creation of public policy. The rural constitution is a set of community rules derived from the general will of local people and generally agreed among the people. Therefore, the development of a rural constitution would happen from the gathering of local people, together with every local organization and community network, and the local administration, supporting community development programs (Lekwiwat, 2018).

According to Sirapanichkul (2013), communities could themselves create an organization to administer the development of a rural constitution for their community and for the follow-up in the process, and development of the rules of the constitution. Such an organization could support the implementation of the local constitution with the cooperation of local organizations and government offices. The local administrative authorities and bodies could apply the local constitution in the municipal ordinances or laws and support the public policies or community projects under the implementation of the local constitution with funding. In this regard, the local constitution contributes to social empowerment among the state, the local government, communities, and the people (Sirapanichkul, 2013).

The rural constitution in a community comes from the demands and aspirations of the local people and manifests their general will. The community rules are different in each community, reflecting the local community context, and the demands and agreements of the people in a community. The major principle of rural constitutional development, therefore, is that participation in the activities and decision-making is open for everyone and all sectors and is inclusive of and follows their thinking

and actions, to gain mutual and community benefits as partners in the development of a rural constitution for their community.

Methodology

This research was qualitative research using both documentary research and focus groups on a participatory action research program embedded in the rural constitutional process of Banyang sub-district, Wat Bot, Phitsanulok province, Thailand.

Participants

The sample groups or participants were the 14 rural and community leaders together with 2 representatives from each of the 11 villages in the Banyang sub-district. Another group included 4 representatives from local organizations such as the local savings group, Banyang Health Promotion Hospital, the Wat Bot Agricultural Extension Office and the Wat Bot Police Station.

Data Collection

Given this broad representation from the communities and the administrative and law enforcement organizations, the research followed the participatory action research paradigm where the researchers worked closely together with the community while observing the process of development of the rural constitution and participatory public policy of the Banyang community. The research process is described here:

The researcher introduced the participatory action research concept and process used when observing the process of rural constitution to the local and community leaders.

The Rural Constitutional Council was organized as the functioning group of the rural constitutional development and for the implementation of the participatory public policy from the rural constitution.

The rural contexts and issues were reviewed, and a method of data collection and analysis of information garnered from the local and community leaders, was devised, and considered by those leaders.

Ways of effectively communicating for the better understanding on matters related to the rural constitution were arranged with local and community leaders and representatives from each village and local organizations as well as in the wider public.

Public hearings were organized with people in the

community to discuss the development of the rural constitution and to hear the views and opinions of the members of the community.

A draft of rural constitution was developed with the Rural Constitutional Council.

After formal consideration by the Rural Constitutional Council, the rural constitution was promulgated in the Banyang community for implementation.

Follow-up and evaluation of the impact of the rural constitution was undertaken.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, the content analysis of all the data and documents from the focus groups and from interviews with the local and community leaders during the drafting of the rural constitution was undertaken. This activity provided an analysis of the conclusions and discussions regarding the concept of a rural constitution and participatory public policy and the processes observed and recorded.

Results

The Process of Rural Constitution of Banyang Community

The process of developing and distributing the rural constitution of the Banyang community occurred with the cooperation between academics and local and community leaders, for the resolution of community issues. Initially, the focus was on the issue of road safety but was extended and elaborated to encompass other important community issues to do with environmental pollution, community health, the local economy and the drug problem extant in the communities. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the communities became a significant major issue and challenge facing the communities during 2020. The development of the rural constitution also highlighted the issues facing the communities' and deepened their community members' awareness of those problems and the purpose of resolving those problems together as a community. In this regard, the participatory process helped to develop the issues encapsulated in the rural constitution derived from discussion and agreement among local and community leaders and representatives from the villages and local organizations.

The Rural Constitutional Council, that was created as the functional administration for rural constitution development and implementation of participatory public policy from the rural constitution, included 55 members

including: (1) The Chief Executive of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization; (2) The Deputy Chief Executive of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (1 person); (3) The Chief Administrator of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization; (4) The Sub-district headman; (5) Ten village headmen; (6) Representatives from the villages (22 persons); and (7) Fifteen representatives from social groups in the community, and 4 representatives from local organizations.

The research used focus groups within the Rural Constitutional Council to provide the policies and practices to include in the draft of the rural constitution and review and revise these in the light of the rural context and issues identified. Four main issues were identified and encompassed in the rural constitution: (1) Life and property safety issues such as road safety, drugs, gambling and social conflicts; (2) Environmental Management such as community cleaning, reduction of community pollution, household waste management and community forest preservation and protection of the natural environment; (3) Promoting the rural economy by supporting home-grown vegetable production and household-based additional occupations; and (4) Health promotion in the community such as family health improvement through community exercise programs, eliminating the Aedes mosquito larva, food safety education, health care of elders, disabled persons and psychiatric patients. The health issue of greatest concern at that time was the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 within the community.

Following the issuance of the draft rural constitution, public hearings were organized with the cooperation from local and community leaders and participation of villagers as well as the representatives from the local offices and

organizations that included, as indicated previously, the local savings group, the local health-promoting hospital of Banyang sub-district, Wat Bot police station and Wat Bot Agricultural Extension Office. The discussion in the public hearings contributed to the further development of the draft of the rural constitution with the issues upon which everyone agreed. The council of rural constitution then revised the draft to include information gained from the public hearing process again, and the Rural Constitution of the Banyang Community was issued by the Banyang Subdistrict Administrative Organization. Subsequent implementation and evaluation of the outputs and impacts of the rural constitution were conducted in a 3-month activity in the research project.

In summary, the process of the rural constitutional development started from the cooperation among local and community leaders and the academics. The major process of participation in the drafting of the rural constitution was in organizing the rural council of rural constitutional development and the subsequent public hearings. Also, the support of Sub-district Administrative Organization, providing venues, staff and accessories, was crucial. Key persons in the community played an important role in promoting the rural constitution, especially the Chief Administrator of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization and the sub-district headman. Strong relationships between the local and community leaders were demonstrated as one major factor contributing to the successful development of the rural constitution. The network within the community encompassing the social groups and local organizations was also an imperative to the success of the process. The process of the rural constitutional development is illustrated as in the flowchart in [Figure 1](#).

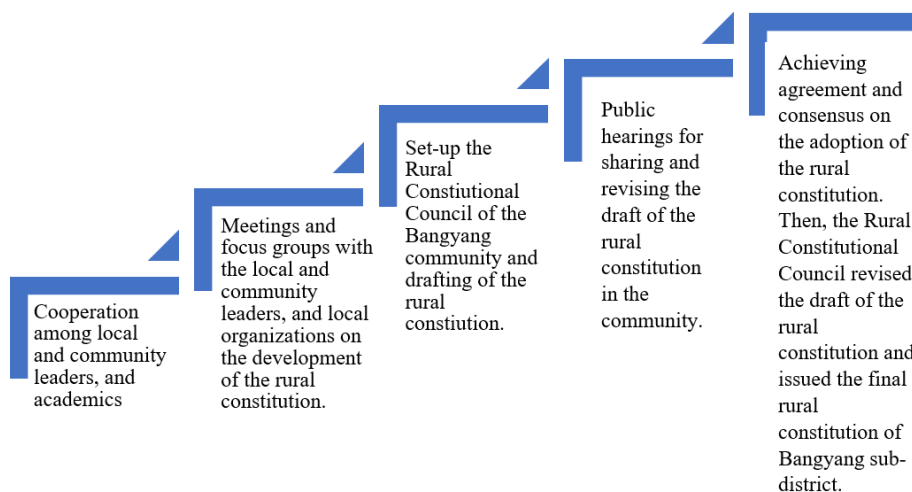


Figure 1 The process of the development of the rural constitution of Banyang community, Phitsanulok province, Thailand

The Rural Constitution and the Participatory Public Policy

The rural constitution of Banyang district was issued with 11 sections: the first was a general section about the definitions in rural constitution such as tambon (subdistrict), village and social measure. The second section was about road safety, which enforces drivers and riders to follow the Land Traffic Act BE. 2522. For instance, all cars and motorcycles were required to have insurance and a speed limit of 40 km/hour was imposed in the villages.

Section 3 was about drug prevention, requiring every member of the tambon to inform the police or the village committee and provide information regarding drug use to enable a cooperative approach to overcoming this problem. Section 4 was about preventative measures against the COVID-19 spread, where all community members were required to self-monitor protect themselves by wearing a mask and regular hand cleaning with alcohol gel. All community members were required to be vaccinated as protection against COVID-19.

Section 5 covered health promotion. For instance, the head of the family should promote family health with frequent exercise. Section 6 was about the rural economy. Every household should reduce their expenses and attempt to increase their incomes and savings by careful household budgeting and production of accounts every month. Additional part-time or household-based occupations were suggested and supported to increase the economic capacity of the villages and areas. Enhancing household income and economic support of the family were supportive considerations.

Section 7 was about environmental preservation. Everyone had to be responsible for the natural environment and forest preservation. Accessing the forest and hunting wild animals was prohibited. Section 8 was about the well-being of society: gambling was prohibited, as were sales of alcohol and cigarettes to children under 18 years of age, including at cultural and religious events and amusement events in the villages and tambon. Section 9 was about the implementation of the rural constitution, focusing on communication of the contents of the rural constitution and ensuring understanding of it in each village by means of public information campaigns and monthly village meetings.

Finally, enforcement of the provisions of the rural constitution was included in Sections 10 and 11, which define the penalties, and rewards included. Violation of the Land Traffic Act, 2522 and the narcotics & psychotropics control laws would incur fines and penalties under those

laws. A village fund fine or 50 baht for committing an offense 3 times was invoked. Village and tambon benefits, such as loans from the village fund, could be cut off for up to 2 years. Additional community services were imposed on anyone violating the Land Traffic Act. This included 4 hours of community service for each offense, which may include cleaning the toilets in the temple and school.

Rewards for community members considered to have been a good role model in the community were given, and the Banyang subdistrict administrative organization would organize an honor award ceremony for those role models each year. A certificate and an encouragement award were provided to any role model family who had never violated the land traffic act. Therefore, a policy of public participation in community safety, health, and environment was promulgated, with support for a sustainable economy.

Hence, the rural constitution and participatory public policy reflect community participation in their self-governance and resolving public issues. As one can see, the community leaders and villagers discuss and share opinions together about community issues. The rural constitution and public policy of community affect key decision-making, as they determine what is the collective self-governance within the participatory process of rural constitution. It is an important basis for community democracy wherein people directly participate in local development plans and decision-making in the policies and rules. The rural constitution defines community rules or the common law of the local people in their self-governed management. The process of the rural constitution is related to participation and social empowerment in and between the community, local government and organizations. Therefore, the process of rural constitutional development is an open space for public sharing and could contribute to the participatory democracy of the community.

Furthermore, the process of the rural constitution also enhances the capacity of local and community leaders as well as the representative community members in matters such as leadership and communication skills. For instance, the subdistrict headman becomes the key speaker and leader in the process of rural constitutional development. Meanwhile, the village headmen learn to express their opinions and communicate with the villagers about the important rules and substance of the rural constitution. Strong community leaders become the crucial factor for community development. As one can see, the roles of the subdistrict and village headmen support community communication ensuring mutual

understanding among the villagers about the rural constitution. Also, they are the key persons who regulate and enforce the rules of the rural constitution within their community such as conducting the rules of community road safety and the Land Traffic Act BE. 2522. Therefore, community leadership enhances implementation of the rural constitution and community policies that affect the community development.

Discussion

An outcome was that the development of a rural constitution contributed to the participatory process for community development, enabling a process of community meetings and sharing of ideas, with deliberate thinking together for solving community issues. The process included the subsequent set-up of a community network in the form of the Rural Constitutional Council. In this regard, the rural constitution became a tool for community development and participatory democracy. Also, it helped the community to resolve their problems with the agreement of community people. Dararut (2018) described a community charter or community constitution as being a law of the commons of the community that comes from the villagers' participation and their social contexts. It helps in conflict resolution and resolves the village's issues. Also, it is in accordance with the principles of democracy because villagers can participate in decision making together.

So, participation is the key to the development of democracy as it allows the expression of social awareness, desires and values of the people brought together under the common purpose of decision-making and in the procedures of the State. That is to say, it is the interactive communication between the State and the Society for a proper decision-making process for the development and propagation of public policy and of State actions, with the support of people (Creighton, 2005).

According to the theory of community democracy, effective participatory decision-making with good administrative structure can enhance social development and community democracy. This is participatory democracy which is popular in the community. However, popular community-based participation also depends on the impact of political and economic forces from outside of the community (Kaufman, 1997), for instance, the national constitution that is open for popular participation in politics and decision-making in public policy. As with Banyang community, the participation in rural constitutional process is based on the civil rights of

community people as it is regulated in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2557. Even though the national constitution does not encompass "community rights", participation is the key for democracy development and ensuring popular rights. Therefore, community participation should be a continuous process that enables communities to develop and reach their potential and progress from individual actions to collective social and political change both at the local and the state levels (Webler et al., 2001).

Similarly, Aragonés and Sánchez-Pagés (2009) described participatory democracy as a process of collective decision-making that combines elements from both direct and representative forms of democracy. The participatory process of the rural constitutional development emphasizes the direct democracy concept, which can be also viewed as a complete decision-making process, from setting the agenda for an issue to the last referendum vote (Schiler, 2007). Therefore, a process of common decision-making in the development of a rural constitution for the villagers is a crucial part of participatory democracy, and participation in a decision-making process is also relevant and desirable in community development.

Consequently, participatory democracy can be viewed as a part of the process of developing a rural constitution which can contribute to community development. Furthermore, participatory democracy changes the rural traditions and culture of villagers to be more democratic, enabling the expression of opinions, participation in solving the problems of the rural community, and encourages decision-making together. Public policy could be based on outcomes from the process of developing the rural constitution when those policies are issued in conformance with the common policy based on the rural constitution. This promotes the self-governed community as the basic of sustainable democracy and development.

In addition, an efficient participation process could create valuable social capital and social empowerment of the community activist components, such as local groups, organizations and community networks which are important for rural constitutional implementation and in the promotion of participatory democracy in the community. Rotprasoe and Boonsri (2018) identified the social capital of community as the essential element for community democracy and for understanding the political culture of Thai rural communities, such as family loyalties and relationships, local culture, traditional wisdom, and for recognizing and assisting informal and formal rural groups. Each community has different norms of social

capital, which are important factors for the participatory process in rural constitutional development as well as the cooperation from local and community leaders, and the social awareness of villagers in their community issues. Both factors also support the social empowerment and self-governance of the community.

As Banyang community, the important social capital is the strong community leaders, a trust of villagers in their village leaders and a social unity among villagers with the supports from the local administrative organization and community organizations. This research finding was different from the case study of the rural constitution of Santisuk Kual Dee in Buriram province, Northeastern region of Thailand, which applied the Buddhist religious belief and other religions with the principle of civil society and direct democracy to conduct the rules and implementation of rural constitution (Keatwatcharachai & Prateep, 2019). Nevertheless, the consistency of research finding is the key success factors of constitutional development, which are the strong leadership of community leaders and the village committee including the trust of the villagers to their leaders and participation.

Besides, the research finding was also different from other researches in that the participation process of Banyang rural constitution could lead to the participatory public policy. Meanwhile, the applying of rural constitution with the local plan of local administrative government could enhance the sustainability of rural constitution and policies. As Sirapanichakul, (2013) mentioned, the local administrative offices and bodies could apply the rural constitution in the municipal laws, and support the public policies and community projects.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the development of a rural constitution of Banyang community arose from a concern of the community on road safety issues and subsequently evolved and extended to cover several other issues of community importance, such as the local economy, health issues, social matters, and property security and safe living. The process of development was based on the participation of community members and agreements arrived at by this participatory community process. Social awareness of the people of the community, and the necessary support functions of the Rural Constitutional Council and the Banyang sub-district Administrative Organization were the important factors for pursuing and developing the rural constitution. Cooperation between

the local authorities and community leaders was a significant factor in promoting the rural constitution in this community. For sustainable rural development, the public policies that arise from the rural constitution, the development of a rural constitution in the manner that we have described and justified, should be included in any local development plan. Rural campaigns, public communication and local meetings are essential parts of the process of implementing a rural constitution and sustainable community development.

Further studies on this topic could beneficially encompass the implementation of policies or methods for gaining support from the community and interested administrative organization for the rural constitutional issues and the subsequent development of public policy. Participatory action research (PAR) by researchers in close cooperation with the local leaders and villagers is a proven successful research approach.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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