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Evidence-Based Policy within Thailand's Reform Initiatives (2010-2013):
Re-examination of limitations and biases

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บทคัดย่อ

ความนิยมที่พุ่งสูงขึ้นของนโยบายบนฐานข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ในสหราชอาณาจักรตั้งแต่ปี ค.ศ. 1999 ได้เปลี่ยนแปลงกระบวนการทางนโยบายจากเดิมที่ใช้ฐานคิดทางอุดมการณ์มาสู่ฐานการใช้ข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ เมื่อประเทศไทยได้เริ่มกระบวนการปฏิรูปช่วงปี ค.ศ. 2009 แนวทางของนโยบายบนฐานข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ จึงถูกประยุกต์ใช้ในกระบวนการปฏิรูป ในเชิงทฤษฎีนั้น อคติสองประเภทอาจพบได้ในกระบวนการทางนโยบาย ในขณะนี้ “อคติเชิงเทคนิค” ทำให้กระบวนการความรู้มีความเป็นการเมือง “อคติเชิงประเด็น” กลับทำให้กระบวนการทางนโยบายปลดการเมือง วัตถุประสงค์ของบทความนี้มุ่งสืบค้นความท้าทายและโอกาสของแนวนโยบายบนฐานข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ภายใต้กระบวนการปฏิรูปของประเทศไทย มีการสำรวจและถกเถียงเกี่ยวกับข้อจำกัดและอคติในกระบวนการพัฒนานโยบายปฏิรูป และพบว่าทั้งอคติเชิงเทคนิคและอคติเชิงประเด็นดำรงอยู่ แม้ว่ากระบวนการปฏิรูปถูกคาดหวังให้เป็นพื้นที่ปรองดองสำหรับความขัดแย้งทางการเมืองในประเทศ อคติเชิงเทคนิคซึ่งนิยามความสำเร็จผ่านข้อเสนอเชิงนโยบายที่เกิดขึ้น ได้ละเลยกระบวนการทางการเมืองในฐานะพื้นที่สนทนาแลกเปลี่ยนเชิงนโยบาย การกีดกันผู้ขับเคลื่อนนโยบายความเหลื่อมล้ำทางการเมืองได้นำไปสู่ความไม่สมดุลของกระบวนการริเริ่มนโยบาย ซึ่งมีเพียงผู้ขับเคลื่อนนโยบายความเหลื่อมล้ำทาง

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เศรษฐกิจและสังคม ดังนั้นเอง ข้อเสนอเชิงนโยบายจึงมิได้เชื่อมโยงกับความต้องการหลักของสังคม นอกจากนี้ ประเด็นนโยบายที่ถูกเสนอโดยคนบางกลุ่มก็ไม่เชื่อมโยงกับประเด็นนโยบายโดยรวม เนื่องจากกระบวนการ ทบทวนข้อมูลความรู้เป็นส่วนสำคัญของกระบวนการวิจัยทางนโยบาย ทำให้ประเด็นของกลุ่มประชากรชาย ขอบที่ไม่มีข้อมูลอยู่ในระบบทางการ และประเด็นทางยุทธศาสตร์สำคัญ หายไป อคติเชิงเทคนิคและอคติเชิง ประเด็นทำให้เกิดการกีดกันกลุ่มประชากรจำนวนมากออกไปจากกระบวนการนโยบายปฏิรูป โดยเฉพาะกลุ่ม คนเสื้อแดงซึ่งเป็นกลุ่มต่อต้านรัฐบาล ซึ่งมอบหมายให้เครือข่ายผู้สนับสนุนรัฐบาลหรือกลุ่มคนเสื้อเหลืองเป็น แกนหลักในสำนักงานปฏิรูปและสมัชชาปฏิรูป แม้ว่ากระบวนการทางนโยบายไม่อาจหลีกเลี่ยงข้อจำกัดและ อคติดังกล่าวได้ การดำเนินงานด้วยความตระหนักต่อสิ่งเหล่านั้นอาจสร้างการเปลี่ยนแปลงจากเดิมได้

คำสำคัญ: หลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์; นโยบาย; อคติ; ปฏิรูป; การขัดแย้ง

Abstract

The rising popularization of evidence-based policy in the United Kingdom since 1999 has changed the way of policy making from the ideological led-based to evidence based. As Thailand launched its country reform initiative in 2009, the evidence-based policy approach was endorsed within the reform process. Theoretically, two kinds of biases could be found within the policy process. While the 'technical bias' politicizes the scientific process, the 'issue bias' depoliticizes the policy process. The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges and opportunities of the evidence-based policy in the reform process of Thailand. Thailand's reform policy approach will be inspected and discussed regarding its limitation and biases. Both technical and issue biases are founded within the reform policy process. Although the reform initiative is expected to be the reconciliation platform for the country political conflict, its technical bias, which defined success as policy recommendation, has neglected political process as policy dialogue platform. The exclusion of political inequality advocates has caused the uneven policy formation process, which included only social and economic inequality advocates. Hence, the proposed policy recommendations could not link with the main social need. Additionally, the policy issues proposed by specific advocates are not related with overall policy problems. As the review process was the main policy research methodology, unavailable data of most marginalized population and absent of main strategic issues are overlooked. Both technical and issue biases have caused exclusion of many population groups, especially the red shirt people, from the reform policy process. Even if limitations and biases in policy process could not be avoided, conducting policy process with awareness of these could make the difference.

Keywords: Evidence Based; Policy; Biases; Reform; Conflict

Introduction

The popularization of evidence-based policy has risen since 1999 as Blair government in the United Kingdom tried to change the decision making within policy from the ideological led-based to evidence based. The trend has broadened to global level as well, since the World Health Organization promoted the evidence-based policy as powerful instrument to tackle health inequity in 2008. The main advocator of evidence-based policy is led by health sector. Therefore, it is undoubtedly, as Thailand begun its country reform initiative in 2009, steered by health reform network, the evidence-based policy approach was endorsed within the reform process. Even in 2014, after the dissolution of the appointed reform mechanisms, Suwit Wibulpolprasert M.D., who was a member and Vice Chair of WHO executive board during 2004-2007 and one of influential mind among Thai health network, proposed to Yingluck government to 'adapt the process of Health Assembly and Reform Assembly to the country reform process, since recommendations contributed by these mechanisms were not based on emotion but make use of evidence based data and participation process as well' (เสนอรัฐบาลใหม่ใช้กลไกสมัชชาสุขภาพเป็นกระบวนการปฏิรูปประเทศ, 2014).

Experimental methods to evaluate intervention and measure effects are fundamental 'what works' principle in evidence based approach. An instance of evidence based research is the evaluation of oral rehydration solution (ORS) application against diarrhea mortality (Munos et al., 2010), which became the modest and inexpensive medical intervention saving millions of children's lives in developing countries (WHO, 2009).

However, the 'what works' principle has two major limitations. The first one is that the evidence is not associated with social desirability. The second one is that the evidence could not be generalized or implied within every context. These barriers have raised two question about the quality of the evidence. What is the good evidence? How could the evidence be improved?

The positivist empiricist paradigm plays a significant role among advocators of evidence based policy approach. The need of evidence is not anything than scientific evidence, which is believed that objectivity as main scientific characteristic could provide rational choices for all stakeholders and serve social goals effectively. It is comprehensible that solid trust in evidence came from the preceding success of evidence based policy research, especially from health sector.

Since 1978, the strong evidence from the Whitehall Studies demonstrates the association between unfairness and health (Marmot et al., 1978). Michael Marmot, an epidemiologist and pioneer researcher in health inequality, was invited by the World Health Organization to be the chair of Commission on Social Determinants of Health, which published a famous evidence-based policy recommendation report entitled 'Closing the Gap in a Generation'(Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Subsequently, he was requested from the government to lead an independent review to recommend evidence-based strategies for health inequality reduction in England.

Another book comprising of evidences on inequality, '*Spirit Level*', became nation-wide bestseller and well recognized and mentioned by politician leaders from both Labour party (Eaton, 2010) and Conservative party (Cameron, 2009). Before the general election in 2010, seventy-five members of parliaments signed an agreement to support policies designed to reduce the inequality. Nonetheless, this was not the first time that British government demonstrated their strong beliefs in evidence based approach. The United Kingdom's government once published a white paper in 1999 with the title '*Modernising Government*', which proposed that the government is responsible for development of policies: which deal with the real problems and tackle at the root causes, which are progressive based on evidence (Cabinet Office, 1999).

Nonetheless, the major critique of the evidence based policy approach is that the idea underestimates the complexity of the policy process, which is the platform of political contestation. The policymaking process involves various political interests, which have to choose competing values, goals and/or outcomes. Henceforth, from critical interpretivist perspective, the misuse and misinterpret of evidence can take place. Additionally, different political standpoints could cause different interpretation of the same evidence and scientific evidence could turn into policy based evidence serving each stakeholders' interest.

Different paradigms between advocates and opponents of evidence based policy approach has revealed two fundamental concerns. While the former one concerns about evidence manipulation driven by political interests, the latter one concerns about how evidence can depoliticize political debates or marginalize any social policy issues. As a result, these reflects two kinds of biases, which are technical bias and issue bias (Parkhurst, 2017). Whereas the first politicize the scientific process, the second depoliticize the policy process.

For more than a decade of political polarizations in Thailand, both democratic and reform process became unfinished projects, in which the evidence-based policy has incessantly played an important role in policy and research communities. In 2010, Thai social scientists have engaged with the grand reform schemes involving land reform, educational reform, labor, agriculture, healthcare and welfare reform, etc. Nonetheless, the expected result of social change is still disappointed. Blameworthiness could be non-responsive governmental body or non-inclusive participatory process among civil society because of political polarization, but then again, academics community should reexamine its limitation and critical review the proposed evidence-based policy making approach.

The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges and opportunities of the evidence-based policy in the reform process of Thailand. It will begin with illustration of historical background and limitations of the evidence based policy approach. The multiple politics of evidence framework based on two forms of biases will be described subsequently. At the end, Thailand's reform policy approach will be inspected and discussed regarding its limitation and biases.

Evidence-Based Policy Approach

Historical Background

Since an ancient Greece, Aristotle recognized the role of knowledge as powerful instrument for advising rulers and bringing about political achievement (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005). Machiavelli as well, considered that the evidence based on social and political practice and historical viewpoint could improve the quality of 'princes' decisions (Hammersley, 2013).

After the World War II, the significance role of research in addressing policy issues has been emphasized (Lerner & Lasswell, 1951). Since the emergence of empirical social sciences including sociology, economics, political science, social psychology and the risen demand of policy, the strong relationship between knowledge and power have been established. Still, most of outcomes were unsatisfied, even though a lot of social science academics had been involved in the grand development schemes (Innes, 2002). Hence, the reform of social policy research was required (E. Miller et al., 2002).

On the other hand, the progress of evidence-based medicine has contributed great development in health sector and became a vital inspiration for numerous calls for evidence-based policy today (Wright et al., 2007).

Besides, the achievement of evidence medicine has come across to policy arena as well. Although the earlier form of evidence-based policy took place in Australia (Banks, 2009), the United Kingdom became the leader of the contemporary movement.

By policy development, evidence based approaches could be one of following: (i) existing research review; (ii) new research commissioning; (iii) experts consultants; (iv) other appropriate options (Bullock et al., 2001). Hence, a wide range of supported mechanisms for evidence-based policy approach have been established as well involving funding organization (e.g. Economic and Social Research Council, Campbell Collaboration), research institutes (e.g. Oversea Development Institute), research networks (e.g. Evidence Network, Alliance for Useful Evidence).

Limitations of Evidence

The motivation of finding evidence is to find out 'what works', which is naturally attractive from pragmatic outlook. As mentioned previously, there exists two significant limitations of 'what works', which calls for the better quality of evidence.

The first challenge is that the evidence is not linked with the social need or stakeholder's prioritization. An obvious case from health sector could illustrate this point. As the drug Sildenafil have strong evidences consisting of noteworthy positive results from 16 trials. (Burls et al., 2001), but the provision of this drug could not get priority in health budget. The highest standard of effectiveness evidence of the drug, which is sold worldwide under the brand name Viagra, still could not get priority over the other essential concerns, which should be addressed by health programmes. Another example is the counting of homeless population (Cloke et al., 2001). Although the number of homeless people in the city is accepted and recognized by all governmental service providers, having very small population proportion is at risk of having less priority and being excluded from the governmental services and policies. Both instances identify the key question of 'what should be', which could not be answer simply with 'what works'.

The second challenge is the generalizability of the evidence. The evidence based approach for medicine treatment and the medical drug trials are expected to be generalizable, because it is acknowledged that humans share physiology and biochemistry and many human body features operate the same across a wide range of circumstances. On the other hand, the results of social experiments could not be predictable because of the social process complexity. Some efforts, hence, works form some people in some situation. A classic example is the review study of efforts for criminal offenders' rehabilitation, which found only 'isolated' success cases. While the findings result of the research was construed as 'nothing works', it was argued that some crime rehabilitation scheme work for some people in some situation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Rather than conducting and investing in more experiments to find generative mechanism for the richness of heterogeneous contexts, critical question should be how those mechanisms work in different context.

Two Forms of Biases

Within a conventionally competitive policy space, two forms of evidentiary biases could arise from the politically motivated interests. While technical bias reveals the way in which the evidence might be misused to serve political purposes, issue bias reflects the way in which the evidence could marginalize other social concerns from the policy decision making process involving contestation of values. The following manifestation of two forms of bias within the creation, selection and interpretation of evidence has constructed a multiple politics of evidence framework (Parkhurst, 2017).

In general, the technical bias could be driven by political interests, when evidence is tactically manipulated by groups to acquire a desired policy outcome from decision making process. A simple example is the impact assessment of industrial development in Thailand, where corporate actors used evidence in order to avoid regulation or restriction of their establishment and production. Since profit maximization is the fundamental motivation of business sector, scientific best practice of evidence accuracy is not usually business core value. Moreover, since maximization of profit is ethical in an ideal competitive free market, acknowledge the profit motive as the main goal of business sector provide understandable and predictable political strategies of them regarding evidence.

With technical bias, a study might be designed to advance a favored policy goal or study design might be modified mid-stream to produce desired findings. Evidence could be suppressed as well, so that the incomplete findings could justify a particular position, while a significant related

data that might contradict that position is ignored. In addition, interpretations in policy debates might be incorrect, e.g. preferred strategy is claimed by premature clausal, understanding of risk is chaotic.

On the other hand, the issue bias can occur when policy outcomes are not pre-determined and the promoted evidence twists agendas to measureable issues instead of important issues of affected population. Issue bias could be problematic, if it excludes or underrate important public concerns engaged with the multiple set of values (Barnes & Parkhurst, 2014). Promotion of specific norms of evidence use is no other than setting the rules for the evidence informed policy making process. An instance of issue bias is an emphasis on experimental trial as the best way for decision making. From political perspective, the priorities could be shift towards issues that have already experimented or benefit to experimentation.

With issue bias is related with the decision over what issues to study, how to investigate and what questions can have political impact. Without pre-agreed outcome, the political value choices might be muddy. Important research topics might be ignored, trendy and short-term policy topics are selected instead of significant topics. In case of agendas are driven by data availability, the specific need of marginalized groups would be excluded from attention. Some groups may be in need of policy attention, but evidence generation is infeasible. In some cases, there might be bias against investigating the need of a particular marginalized or stigmatized group. Systematic discrimination would disregard marginalized people from being the research subject. Even though the topic is being studied, issue bias could manifest in the outcomes selection, if outcomes of interest include only the outcome of one side of the policy debate. By utilizing evidence from a sub-set of related policy concerns, a policy option might be represented as evidence based. The interpretation of the importance of evidence might be unjustified as well.

Evidenced Based Policy within Reform Initiative of Thailand

For more than twenty-five years, 'reform' became the core mission of Thailand involving the political reform that brought the constitution of 1997 (McCargo, 2002; หนาพล, 2560), which has been recognized as the most democratic in Thai modern political history. Five years later, the administrative reform by Thaksin Government reorganized all ministries and introduced the new less bureaucratic structure that is more responsive and result-oriented (Akira, 2014). Since 2006 a series of political conflicts has continued and turn out to be the political polarization and caused divisiveness of the Thai people into red shirt and yellow shirt supporters (Nostitz, 2009; Pongsawat,

2014). In 2010, therefore, the country reform process was introduced as a reconciled effort under Abhisit government (Crisis Group Asia Report, 2010; Dalpino, 2011).

Two key reform mechanisms were the Country Reform Committee and the Country Reform Assembly. While the Country Reform Committee functioned as policy think tank, the Country Reform Assembly was responsible for organizing policy formation platforms. The management of these two reform bodies is supported by the Reform Office, which had a decade of experience with public policy process based on evidence approach by the National Health Commission Office (มติคณะรัฐมนตรี 29 มิถุนายน 2553 [Cabinet Resolution 29 June 2010], 2010).

By transitioning to Yingluck government, the Country Reform Committee had 10 months working period, but the Country Reform Assembly had ended its responsibility 3 years later.

In 2011, a significant report of the country reform committee entitled 'Thailand Reform Guideline: Recommendations for Political Parties and Voters' was published. The Country Reform Committee pointed out that inequality and unfairness were the root causes of the chronic political conflicts. With the vision of 'justice leverage and inequality reduction in the society', a five-dimension of inequality framework was proposed involving income, right, opportunity and human dignity. The significant reform mission was to adjusting and balancing the "power relations" between government, private sector and civil society. Therefore, resources redistribution was necessary for empower people to support negotiation. It is believed that negotiation as another manifestation of political dialogue could provide agreement among governmental, private and public sectors (คณะกรรมการปฏิรูป [Reform Committee], 2011).

The report content covered structural concerns and policy recommendations for 4 reform dimensions and issues as following (see Table 1):

Table 1 Reform Policy Recommendations in 2011(คณะกรรมการปฏิรูป [Reform Committee], 2011)

	Resources and Opportunities	Policy Recommendations		
		Proposed	Drafting	Unavailable
1.	natural	agricultural land minerals	resources water sea and coastline	forest environment and ecosystem
2.	economics	budgeting	labor agriculture energy (contract farming) (farmer safety net) (farmer debt) (agriculture market)	capital tax system market system commerce and industry
3.	social		education religion and spiritual public health urban life	culture and identity
4.	political	power structure		justice process information access media and communication military

The proposed policy recommendations of the Country Reform Committee tried to follow the evidence-based tradition as Anand Panyarachun, the president of the committee and the charismatic former prime minister stated that “we won’t propose abstractions, but action plans, practical and ready to implement” (“อานันท์”ตั้งแล้วกก.ปฏิรูปประเทศไทย, 2010). Initially, almost thirty issues were proposed as reform issues. After 10 months working period, only 4 reform issues recommendations were finished and proposed to the government and public as well. While some issues were drafting by their own subcommittee, some issues were lacked of responsible persons and supported research study (Thailand Future Foundation, 2014; สำนักข่าวอิศรา, 2011).

By inquiry of limitations and biases of evidences within reform policies, the reform report will be examined based on earlier mentioned evidence limitation and a multiple politics of evidence framework.

Although the reform initiatives have been established to be reconcile mechanism between red shirt and yellow shirt supporters, the policy issues studied by the Country Reform Committee have put an emphasis on social and economic inequality rather than political inequality, which is the major concern of the red shirts supporters. For that reasons, the policy recommendations of the Country Reform Committee and the policy dialogue platforms organized by the Country Reform Assembly were lacked of participatory from red shirt advocates and the reform initiatives could not become reconciled mechanism as expected.

Limitations and biases of evidence based reform policy recommendations are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Limitations and biases of evidence based reform policy recommendations

Challenges of Evidence Based Reform Policy Recommendations		Inequality			
		Natural	Economics	Social	Political
Limitations	social need	No land resource distribution for urban area	No wealth distribution	N.A.	exclusion of political inequality issues
	generalizability	rural area focused, less urbanization	Lack of informal economy	N.A.	Only self governing province
Biases	Technical	E. generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prefer short success than structural change ● Neglected political inequality ● Neglected marginalized issues (informal workers, migrant workers) 		
		E. selection	● Available evidence based researches		
		E. interpretation	● social and economic inequality are main reasons for political conflicts		
	Issue	E. generation	● Prefer issues with strong knowledge and evidences		
		E. selection	● Reviewed		
		E. interpretation	● All available evidences are important equally.		

Although the economic inequality has been addressed as the significant driven of the reform initiatives, there exists only one policy recommendations for budgeting, which could not provide wealth distribution including of income and resources distribution. Moreover, all social policy recommendations were still in drafting process. Education and health policies, which are the most social desires, have not been introduced. Therefore, all of the four proposed reform policy recommendations are not responded to the main social needs.

While the proposed policies focused on resource distribution in rural area, the lack of linkage with urbanization has weaken its support from the affected population in urban area. While the land distribution policy recommendations could not link with the affordable housing policy in urban area, the agriculture policy recommendations could not integrate rural farmers as informal labor with urban informal workers in service sectors. Hence, most of proposed reform policies are more specific than generalized.

Furthermore, even though the policy recommendation on the self-governing province is generalized for all provinces, there exists no recommendation tackling unequal power structure causing political inequalities such as more people participatory in state organizations e.g. election committee, courts, education and health ministry etc.

As expected, both technical and issue biases are noticeable as well.

Since the role of the Country Reform Committee ended after 10 months, their main recommendations were contributed to the Country Reform Assembly, which provided participation processes among stakeholders including governmental sectors, non-governmental sectors and academic sector. 20 issues and 94 recommendations were the results of this 3 years Country Reform Assembly, which were criticized as an expensive process of 1.3 billion Baht and none of recommendations were implemented (Thailand Future Foundation, 2014). Because of the short period of reform initiatives by the Country Reform Assembly, which required consensus among stakeholders in each proposed issue each year, all recommendations had put emphasis on small structural change, which could guarantee implementation success in short time and exhibited its practical dimension. Therefore, important policy issues tackling social and economics inequalities e.g. taxation, redistribution of land resources, health equity, fair education system, are disregarded. The drive for short success has neglected political inequality issues and treated it as the result from the social and economic inequality only. Marginalized issues are ignored as well, because the lack of available data and research. Marginalized population, hence, become more invisible in all policies and caused more inequality. Besides, among political conflicts at that time, reform advocates tried

to keep distance from political issues. While the policy research process focused on tackling social and economic inequality, it is already politicized by reform advocates technically.

Likewise, while the policy issues with available data and strong movements were introduced, important issues lacking of data and existing advocates could be easily ignored e.g. fund for strengthening civil society, mechanism for reinforcement of co-opting, association and collective negotiation. The issue bias, also, has overlooked the politicization in the policy process, in which only included policy advocates could participate in reform initiatives. One example was labor reform issue, which was dominated by formal workers' representatives and academics and excluded informal workers advocates. Additionally, policies strengthening and empowering civil society issues were ignored because the lack of data and research, although they are significant for the whole reform process.

Conclusion

All of reform policy recommendations are faced with limitations and could not avoid biases. Although the reform initiative is expected to be the reconciliation platform for the country political conflict, its technical bias, which defined success as policy recommendation, has neglected political process as policy dialogue platform. The exclusion of political inequality advocates has caused the uneven policy formation process, which included only social and economic inequality advocates. Hence, the proposed policy recommendations could not link with the main social need. Additionally, the policy issues proposed by specific advocates are not related with overall policy problems. As the review process was the main policy research methodology, unavailable data of most marginalized population and absent of main strategic issues are overlooked. Both technical and issue biases have caused exclusion of many population groups, especially the red shirt people, from the reform policy process. Since they were the main protestors against Abhisit government, who appointed both the Country Reform Committee and the Country Reform Assembly, and the Reform Office was led by the yellow shirt as Abhisit government supporter.

Even if limitations and biases in policy process could not be avoided, conducting policy process with awareness of these could make the difference.

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