

Social Welfare Needs and Policies for Elderly People in Thailand: A Case Study in Pitsanulok Community

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Abstract

The objectives of this study are to study the level of satisfaction of older people with social welfare policy, to study the problems of social welfare policy, and to study public policy guidelines for social welfare in a community in Pitsanulok province. We did quantitative and qualitative methods for 3,701 questionnaires, interviews of 29 participants and a focus group of 15 experts to discuss policy guidelines. From the study, we found that older people were satisfied with social welfare policy at a moderate level such as social security, knowledge and education. However, the problems of social welfare policy such as the monthly payment assistance is not enough in the current economy, government's lack of budget, and not allowing government agencies to take care of older people, so local government should create a department for service and support older people and also train government officers to have more knowledge about how to take care of older people. In addition, the government should train more healthy volunteers in communities to take care of and help to transfer older people to hospitals.

Keywords: social welfare, policy, elderly people, Pitsanulok Community

1. Introduction

For many decades, Thailand has been changing into an aging society, with a growing number of older people because medical technology makes people live longer. However, there is an economic issue between adults and younger people cannot stay home to take care of older relatives. They often work outside the home to earn money for supporting their family. This cause makes older people stay home alone without anyone to take care of them and there is some concern about this issue. (Department of Social Development and Welfare, 2008). In 2010, 9 percent of Thailand's total population is 65 or older, and that number will increase to 14 percent by 2021. This will further increase to 20 percent in 2031, and by 2031, Thailand will be an "aging society at the highest level" (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013).

The growth rate of the older population creates many social problems because older people have declining health in body and mind. Younger people work, some go to another region, these facts decrease the relationship between older and younger people in the family, and younger people cannot take care of their older family members (Bureau of Health Promotion, 2002). In addition, older people lack access to government welfare and many are supported by the government because they are lack information. Every government and private sector should to solve this problem for older peoples' development. In addition, the Thai government has a national policy to support and encourage older people but it is still in its early stages and has many problems agencies (Bureau of Empowerment for Older Persons, 2009). Several problems older people in Thailand face include living alone, poverty, having to work to earn money for the necessities of life, and declining health (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2004).

As we mentioned above about the problems of older people, the Royal Thai government has been aware of the challenges arising from an aging population and has given increased priority to issues relating to older persons. The plan covered health, education, income, employment, and social and cultural aspects. Later, a Working Committee on Policy and Action for the Elderly was set up to formulate the Essence of the Long-term Policies and Measures for the Elderly (1992-2011) to help accelerate welfare action. These policy instruments provide a

policy framework for welfare promotion, protection, and the empowerment of older persons throughout the country. The government provides social welfare assistance of 300 baht (300 baht is approximately 10 US dollars) per month to older persons having an annual income of less than 10,000 baht. It is planned to increase the coverage of this assistance to 76 per cent of all eligible poor older persons in Thailand. The government has also created an Older Persons' Fund with an initial outlay of 60 million baht. Adults who take care of their old parents have been given an entitlement for tax exemptions up to a specified maximum based on their income. In addition, the government has taken other initiatives, such as support to strengthen income security in old age, life-long education, day centers for health care and promotion, family assistance, counseling, social activities for the elderly, promotion of healthy behaviors from younger people, and creating awareness in the community by organizing social activities for older persons. The government seeks to inculcate a positive attitude towards aging (United Nations Population Fund, 2006).

For many years, the Thai government set up a plan to take care of older people; however there is still a lack of services and older people still face problems. The older population continues to grow, and Thailand is going to be an aging society. If the government does not set up the right policy to support older persons, it will lead to a big problem in the near future. The research questions in this paper are what is the level of satisfaction of older people about social welfare policy, what are the problems of social welfare policy, and are the public policy guidelines for social welfare in a community in Pitsanulok province? Researchers hope that this paper will be a guideline for policymakers to understand the problem and set up a policy to support older people. In addition, researchers hope that this paper will be a guideline for other similar regions.

2. Objectives

- 1) To study the level of satisfaction of older people about social welfare policy;
- 2) To study the problems of social welfare policy;
- 3) To study the public policy guidelines for social welfare in a community in Pitsanulok province.

3. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Rural development projects such as financial support for infrastructure to improve working and living conditions in rural areas and strengthening the population's capacity by promoting the equalization of social security among urban and rural residents can support peoples' lives (Yang, 2013). In addition, rapid capitalist development can make a development successful. However improving human welfare is also important (Wood & Cough, 2006). Social welfare is seen as a form of social contract between government and citizens, and social policies are performed under the acceptance of the majority of citizens, with the aim of meeting human needs within the confines of a market economy (Kabeer & Cook, 2000). Arin (2002) defines the welfare state as minimalist when most of the population is out of the reach of welfare benefits and their protection. In addition, Dedeoglu (2013) suggested that social welfare includes considering all individuals as equals with respect to duties and gender inequality as a private matter and a problem of development. Feminists demanded equality on the basis of individual freedom and liberties.

Most people cannot access state benefits or social welfare to secure their economic standing and must depend on their own resources, so their own resources are too small to create their own wealth (Lapinski et al., 1998). Different wealth has negative or positive effects for individuals (Diener et al., 2010; O'Connell, 2004). Adams and Blieszner (1995) found that persons with a high level of social resources have higher well-being than those with fewer resources; for example, a younger family supporting older people and helping by providing numerous instrument and emotional support. Moor, Graaf and Komter (2013) state that people's vulnerability to a low quality of life does not only dependent on their resources, but also on the resources provided to them by the state. Grundy (2006) suggested that older adults may be especially vulnerable to financial worries because their income depends to an important degree on the generosity of the state, and often also of their family.

Social welfare policy is important for improving the quality of life, and the government should set up a policy in collaboration with the private sector including education, job security, and investment in public service such as healthy activities (Fullinwider, 1998). The state's duty includes not only the economy, public service, national security and development; however it also includes is raising the quality of life of the population (Miller, 1988). Social welfare includes seven factors: education; health; housing; employment and income maintenance; social security; general social service; and recreation (Charoonsawat, 2001).

As we mentioned above, social welfare is important for people who lack the opportunity to access resources, health, education, social service and others. Older people make up the one population segment that needs help and receive social welfare for staying alive. Social welfare for older people will help the poorest older people

and those who are single. However, social welfare policy still does not cover all people and policy is still in the first or second stage. The conceptual framework of the study was as follows:

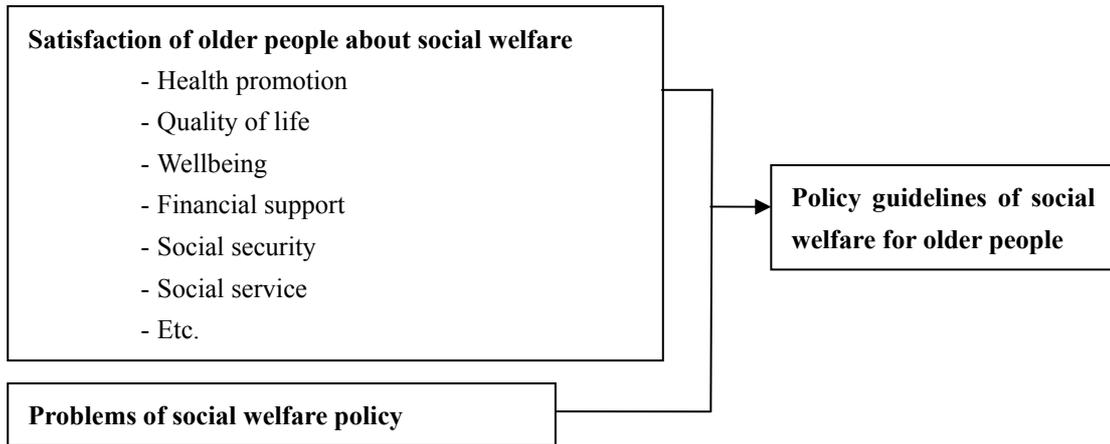


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

4. Methodology

The Phisanulok province is one of North region of Thailand, has area 10,816 km² and population about 853, 575 and populations density 78.91 person/km², the main of economics in the province is agriculture sectors the main production is rice. In this study, we used quantitative and qualitative methods. In the quantitative method, we provided 3,701 questionnaires to older people in 40 communities in urban areas of Pitsanulok province and we selected a sample by using convenience sampling. The questionnaire used the Linkert scale and offered five answers: strongly agree, agree, moderately agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, and we analyzed answers using mean and standard deviation. The closed questionnaire was interpreted by dividing the question scales into a 5-point scale are Higher, High, Moderate, Low and Lowest (5.00-4.5, 4.49-3.50, 3.49-2.50, 2.49-1.50 and 1.49-1.00).

In the qualitative method, we did in-depth interviews with 25 older people, 2 local politicians, and 2 government officers. Then we used content analysis to analyze the data. In addition, we also used focus groups by inviting 15 experts such as local administrative officers, local politicians, government agents, academicians, and older people to discuss policy guidelines for a community, and this was analyzed by descriptive analysis. The study site is Pitsanulok province in the north of Thailand as shown in Figure 2.

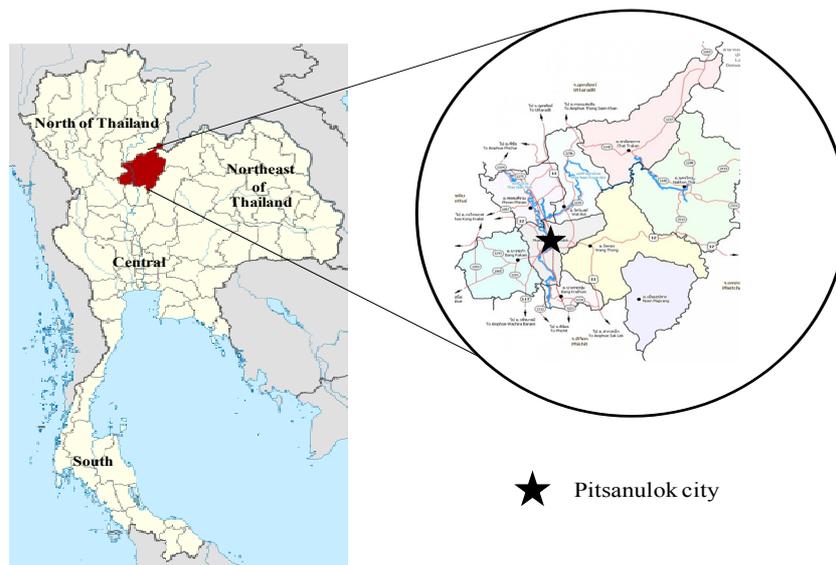


Figure 2. Location of study

5. The Level of Satisfaction of Older People about Social Welfare Policy

From the study of community welfare policy in a Pitsanulok community, we found that municipality, local administrative organization, and central governments encourage many activities in the community for older people. For example, communities and municipalities encourage activities on Songkran day, to play in the water together. The Songkran festival is a Thai traditional celebration of New Year which starts on April 13 and lasts for three days (Sakolnakorn et al., 2009). On the Buddhist day, older people will go to a temple to pray, donate, clean up the temple, and do all these activities together. In addition, the Buddhist Lent or annual three-month Rains Retreat known in Thai as “Phansa” dates back to the time of early Buddhism in ancient India when all holy men, mendicants, and sages spent three months of the annual rainy season in permanent dwellings (Guidescenter, 2000).

From this study, we found that the temple is the center of activities for older people. In the Pisanulok community, this is Buddhism and the temple is the spiritual center for the people. Satisfaction about social welfare policy is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The satisfaction of social welfare policy

The satisfaction of social welfare policy	Satisfaction level		
	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level
Social welfare policy			
Social welfare for the old population	3.19	0.937	Moderate
Savings promotion	3.12	0.982	Moderate
Knowledge and education promotion	3.02	0.942	Moderate
Employment promotion	2.94	0.978	Moderate
Preparation of people to aging society	3.33	0.976	Moderate
Older people promotion	3.30	0.830	Moderate
Social security	3.20	0.903	Moderate
Development of older people	3.43	0.785	Moderate
Monthly allowance	2.48	0.832	Low
Housing for older residents	2.46	0.704	Low
Local government support activities for older people have activities together	3.53	0.932	High
Preparing a walkway for older and disabled people	2.30	0.784	Low
Total	3.19	0.916	Moderate

In Table 1, participants agree about social welfare policy toward the old population. Central and local governments set up activities for older people such as New Year activities, the Songkran festival, and Buddhist day. Local government also encourages local community to make activities for participation of older people such as tradition and cultural activities, activities on Buddhist day at the temple, sports and activities at public parks such as aerobics and dance. Local governments also construction footpaths and handrails for older people.

On the knowledge and education promotion issue, participants were satisfied with how the government has set up a small community library where older people can read books and newspapers, join discussions and meet with other people. Local administration organizations also set up computer training for older people to help them learn how to searching and use social media and how to read online news. In the employment promotion issue, most participants accepted the government policy, however, they still want more new opportunities for gaining income by preparing food and cooking, selling flowers, and making clothes. They also need to set up small business for raising revenue. In the savings promotion issue, most participants and older people are satisfied with a 500 baht allowance that local governments gave to older people every month, and local governments encourage communities to set up a savings and credit cooperative for financing the local community. About the 500 baht allowance, many older people they think it is not enough, if local government give more 500 baht it will be better.

About the policy of preparing people for an aging society, most participants thought the government should reduce taxes for older people, and should teach them about how to save money for expenses after retiring. In the older people promotion issue, central and local governments should collaborate with the private sector to help older people join together like friends, such as creating public spaces for playing music together and art activities such as painting pictures, because if older people have friends to talk with, their life will be happier and more

relaxing.

For social security policy, most participants are satisfied about the government pension fund for older people; however, participants suggested that it is difficult to register and stay at a government residence because there are many limitations, such as not enough space. In addition, the social security policy is not about only older people but government also takes care of younger people and adults. In the development of older people, older people suggested that central and local governments should set up activities and training for older people to make money in their free time and set up space in a market for the older group to sell their handicrafts in the Friday and weekend markets.

There is a low level of satisfaction about a house of older people and their monthly allowances because the allowance is only 10-15 US dollars and that is not enough to live on. Many older people they are stay single, there is no one to take care for them, but a house of older people supported by the government is not enough and there are a limited number of older people who can be residents. There is a high level of satisfaction for local government supporting activities for older people, such as activities on Buddhist day and tradition day.

6. The Problems of Social Welfare Policy

Many older people in Pitsanulok lack education, so they spent their life without planning. Social welfare policy is the way to provide a better life and well-being for older people. However, from our study, we found many problems facing social welfare policy, such as:

- 1) The monthly payment policy the central government assigns to local government to give to older people is 500 baht (approximately 16 US dollars) every month is a big issue, because local government does not give to all people because of small budgets. Our study found that older people who received the 500 baht allowance are close to local politicians and government officers. In addition, 500 baht per month is not enough to stay alive in the current economy.
- 2) Social welfare policy does not guide people when they are working to save money. Government should give information to guide people to save money and invest to have money when they are old. Government should also offer the tools to help them such as organize taxes people paid when they were working, and this may motivate people to pay taxes and help them to save money.
- 3) The government budget transferring funds to local administrative organizations or regional government offices is not enough.
- 4) Many older people have health issues and need health services, too many volunteers do not know enough to help them.
- 5) Many older people are alone and their family works far away home, so the government should spend more money to construct homes for older residents and expand the current older residences
- 6) Central and local governments are not prepared to improve walkways for older and disabled people. Public transportation is too hard for older people to use.
- 7) Government officers lack knowledge about how to operate social welfare programs. They spend most of their time in offices and do not visit communities. Government officers should spend more time visiting communities. In addition, they should use their hearts more than work on duty. However, this issue depends on a personal recruitment system because most government officers in Thailand get their positions from a patronizing system.

7. Public Policy Guideline of Social Welfare to Community in Pitsanulok Province

On this issue, we invited 15 experts such as local administrative officers, local politicians, government agents, academicians, and older people to discuss policy guidelines about a community social welfare. In this section, we will present only what the government should be concerned about, and we will not discuss about policies the government does well. The public policy guidelines are as follows:

- 1) Local government should to set up a department to support older people and also train government officers to understand how to take care of older people.
- 2) Central and local governments should encourage older group parties by transferring some money for making more activities, or help them to set up small enterprises to gain more income.
- 3) Public service for older people is very important. Pitsanulok still lacks public transportation for older people, and pathways for the handicapped and older people, so local government should construct such places and renew the urban plan for handicapped and older people.
- 4) Working at home is an indirect policy for bringing adults and younger family members to work at home or

close to home. If family members work at home, they will have time to take care of older people.

5) The government should encourage local museums to set up a cultural and tradition center by inviting older people to be guides and share their knowledge about local culture and tradition to students, tourists, and people from other communities.

6) The government should to training more healthy volunteers to take care of and help to transfer older people to hospitals.

7) The government should spend more money on older people such as increasing the number of older people who can receive the 500 baht monthly allowance and providing more than 500 baht because 500 baht is not enough in the current economy.

8. Conclusion

Community is important because, many older people need to rest after retiring by settling in their homes. Now that Thailand is an economy society, younger people and families are working, some people close to home, some people far away, and they are leave older people behind. Older people lack of some abilities and need help from other people. Government agencies are one source that can help. In this study, we suggested many policies such as creating more activities for older people, training volunteers to take care them, set up easy small enterprises and training them to work together. This will raise their income and they can relax when they discuss with other older people. Central and local governments should collaborate with the private sector to develop social activities and welfare for older people in the community.

In addition, community enterprises can make more money for older people groups because older people have free time for working at easy tasks (Sakolnakorn & Naipinit, 2013). Local governments should support them by setting up community enterprises and produce simple products and train them to operate a small business. In addition, community enterprises can also work as subcontractors by receiving some part of production from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) or large enterprises (LEs), Working as subcontractors will increase income, give them a higher quality of life, allows them to have closer-knit families, and stronger communities (Sakolnakorn et al., 2010; Sakolnakorn, 2011)

Social welfare is about the well-being of a society. Social welfare is not the same as the standard of living, as it is more concerned with the quality of life that includes factors such as the quality of the environment (air, soil, water, climate), the level of crime, the extent of drug abuse, the availability of essential social services, as well as the religious and spiritual aspects of life. In this paper, we do not argue with what the government is doing, but instead suggest new activities and policies that the government still lacks in its social welfare policy. In Thai society, we found that many government agencies are involved with only one issue, but many departments and ministries are involved in social welfare activities. However, they all lack participation and collaboration among departments and ministries, so the national policy development always comes from the central government in a “top-down approach.”

In this research, our focus is to determine a scenario in which to suggest new policies. The researchers would like to suggest that the Thai government set up set up a single department to support older people and transfer enough funds to create this policy because Thailand is becoming an aging society like Japan. If the Thai government does not establish a good policy, then we will soon discover the pitfalls of an aging society. This research concentrates on Pitsanulok Province as a guideline for the idea of the central government establishing a policy suitable for local areas in many places, with possible distribution to other places so that the results can be compared and data checked at a national level in the future.

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