

Engaging Civil Society in Urban Development: Best Practice in Udon Thani, Thailand

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Abstract

This paper aimed to propose a guideline for city management for the rapid growth of Udon Thani, Thailand. The study was conducted by qualitative approach. In-depth interview and focus group discussion were used as research tools to collect data. The study was done with 12 key participants who were city-related stakeholders and 45 persons who were from the government sector, private sector, and public sector during the focus group discussion method. Content analysis was used to analyze the findings. Research results found that the government sector and private sector were key agencies leading the city expansion and city policy issuance, while the public sector still lacked participation in city development planning. Therefore, participation of the public sector in city development should be promoted more. In addition, social cohesion should be generated to exchange and share knowledge, activity, and experiences in issues related to the city and some problems related to the urbanization phenomenon. Social media was also introduced as a new channel of communication among the citizens and other city stakeholders.

Keywords: participation, development guideline, social cohesion

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of urbanization in developing countries, especially in the Southeast Asia region, has been growing rapidly in the last decades. Urbanization caused many changes, particularly in the cities located in strategic areas and easily linked to neighboring cities in the region. The changes caused by urbanization could be divided into various perspectives such as social, cultural, environmental, economic, etc. However, lack of knowledge on urbanization and the coordination between local and government agencies were obstacles that slowed down city growth. In addition, urbanization has taken place without appropriate direction, and combined cities surrounded other obstacles for urbanization management from an administrative perspective. City management and urban planning between the cities did not run in the same direction and lacked an integration plan. This resulted in the inconsistency of budget management of the city and did not support the expansion of the city.

Another issue is the decentralization of authority from central government to local government. In the past, policy or implemented development plans were issued by the central government with no place for participation by locals. This resulted in an inappropriate development plan which was issued by the central government. Therefore, participation of city agencies in developing plans is essential for locals, especially in three main sectors related to the city that have to cooperate with each other, including the following: 1) the government sector in terms of central government and local government, 2) the private sector, especially business enterprises, and 3) the public sector.

A study of Prompakping et al. (2013) found that participation in city management in Southeast Asia has run as a cooperation between the government sector and private sector to issue guidelines for urban expansion, for instance, providing public infrastructure, community facilities, and related services. However, it was interesting that there was no participation by the public sector in guiding some developing plans. The issuing of management guidelines is currently generated by representatives from local government and central government, but still lacks participation from the public sector, such as local citizens.

There are at least five approaches or modalities in engaging local governments to commit to sustainable practices. They are as follows: 1) national government policies, programs, and support 2) donor-funded or donor-initiated programs and projects 3) civil society-led initiatives 4) peer-to-peer learning that is often generated by networks of city governments and communities 5) visionary and innovative local leaders supported by capable local bureaucracy (Sarosa & Arifin, 2012)

Udon Thani, where is located in northeastern Thailand, is a city that is growing and expanding rapidly. Urbanization process has expanded by several reasons, for instant; the advantage of Udon Thani's location has made it the hub of a region that is filled with regional conveniences, such as a transportation route that links the central and northeast region, and international boundaries (Phuttharak, 2014). However, Udon Thani nowadays is facing city problems. Many city development plans were issued without any perceptions of city stakeholders, and this caused an inefficiency of development process.

This paper tried to find relations among agencies in city management to find the role of each agency in implementing a development plan. The study also focused on the participation of each sector in city management to find out the best practice and applied for the sustainable development in the city of Udon Thani. The findings of the study can be applied to developing guidelines for city management of the rapid growth city.

2. Objective

The objective is to propose guidelines for city management of the rapid growth city Udon Thani, Thailand.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework shows relations of urbanization which caused changes from economic, social, physical, and environmental perspectives. The changes caused by urbanization have been viewed by the city stakeholders, which were (a) the government sector, (b) the private sector, and (c) the public sector, to find the best guideline for development and lead the sustainable development plan for the city.

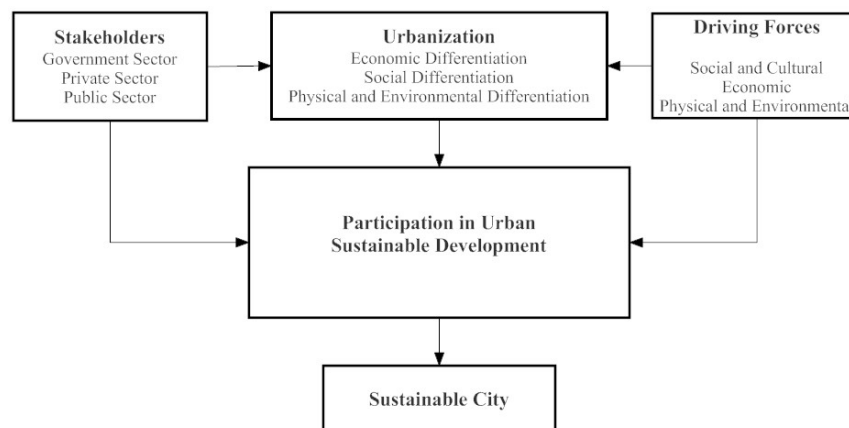


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

4. Methods

A qualitative approach was implemented in this study to find guidelines and relations between city agencies and participation in city development. Research findings could be applied to policy issuing. In-depth interviews were used as a research tool to collect data from key informants, who were representatives of city stakeholders. Twelve key informants were selected from persons related to urban development in the past and in the present. Focus group discussion was also used to find the best guidelines for city development. Participants of focus group discussion totaled 45 persons separated into 3 groups, including participants from the government sector, private sector, and public sector. Data then was categorized, and analyzed by content analysis.

5. Results

5.1 Actor/Agency

5.1.1 Public Sector

In the past, the citizen council was comprised of retired officers such as governors, directors of departments, etc.) and wealthy merchants who had already retired from the business. The council rarely did activity and did not publish to the wider society because most of the council members were not familiar with communication on the

social networks. In addition, the establishment of the group of young people who were new entrepreneurs or part of the younger generation of the business, was still limited and reserved for the business sector only. Most activities were then related to the business sector and government sector. Therefore, it was important to set up a new structure for the citizen council by establishing a new group which consisted of members from various careers, ages, ethnicities, sexes, etc. The new citizen council should be formed by members directly affected by urban development.

Group representatives from the local community should be selected by the local community members themselves. However, the intervention of national politicians in the local elections resulted in local representatives controlled by politicians, who could not perform their role as the representative of the majority of people in the community. Comments and suggestions for urban planning then were not matched with the needs of most people.

Therefore, the new citizen council should create more channels to access and participate in city administration. The council should select representatives from the local community directly without hidden benefits such as ethical, trade, or politics. An intervention in community committee selection by local and national politicians was another problem which slowed down the participation of the local community in development. Policy and solution issuing cannot be generated directly with the real needs of the community.

Creating groups and promoting information exchange was necessary to share knowledge on local development with the community. Such groups might set up a discussion stage and invite local people to share knowledge and experience to develop their own community. This action would lead to the empowerment of the local community in policy proposed by government or agencies related to city development.

5.1.2 Private Sector

Economic growth is directly affected by city expansion. According to the discussion, the private sector, or business sector, had the most important role in guiding the development of the city. The private sector coordinated with both local and central governments to encourage and promote investment in the local area. However, delaying and indistinctness of local government authority were obstacles that stakeholders had to realize and find solutions for. Regarding the coordination between the large-scale enterprises and local governments and local people, there were activities to promote the relationship, and it gave the public a chance to take part in the common perception of environment protection and prevented environmental impacts to the community by asking the locals as a committee of environmental protection. In addition, the private sector also provided a chance to local workers to work for the enterprises, especially the non-skilled workers. These workers would have the chance to work and gain income for their families.

The suggestions of the private sector then focused on improving regulations and reducing steps of operation to speed up the approval process. In addition, a clear policy of investment promotion was important also.

5.1.3 Government Sector

The expansion of Udon Thani took place rapidly and spread out widely to other municipalities. This connection resulted in the close relationship among Udon Thani city and the municipalities that surround it. However, the authority of the local administration was separated by a boundary and did not support the expansion of the city in the same direction as other municipalities. This caused many problems for the city such as problems with infrastructure supports. Another reason was the occurrence of many changes in the management team. Governors or persons in charge would have a short period to stay in position and then move to other places. So, this made the planning and operations lack forward momentum and continuity. In addition, it was found that major development projects normally took a long time to wait for approval by the central government to proceed with the projects, and there were too many steps of operations.

The suggestion from the focus group discussion was that both central and local governments should integrate their development plans together. The plans should be generated by experts and persons who were directly affected, such as the residents in the city of Udon Thani. Giving a chance to city stakeholders would help the government issued development plans easily meet the locals' needs.

The overall conclusion of the focus group discussion reflected roles and the participation of city management by city agencies including the government, private sector, and public sector. Although the government tries to promote participation by the public sector, the public sector has to empower itself. In the past, there were many groups in the public sector that tried to create their own movements, but their objectives were not clear or could not make a huge impact on the public. The government sector also had to conduct clear development plans because the government's management process was too complicated and did not go the same direction. The

government should let private and public sectors participate in the plan issuing process and learn together about the urbanization process for building strength in the local area.

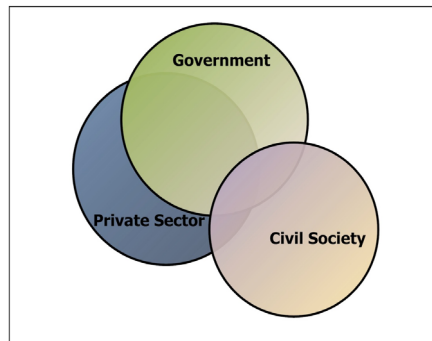


Figure 2. Actor/Agency diagram

5.2 The Best Practices from City Stakeholders for Developing Udon Thani

5.2.1 Social and Cultural

The solution for the slum dealing with drugs and criminal problems was cooperated with by city development-related agencies, including the government sector and the local community. The slum was moved to a new place, namely Ban Mun Kong, where it was supported by the government budget, which built infrastructure and houses. Public agencies also cooperated with the government to conduct activities such as a rescue group to help citizens in case of emergency, or the cross-national couple group that conducted voluntary works for the local community such as teaching English to young people and police assistants. The cross-national couple group was dealing with the local government also to ask for good support from the government on social security.

5.2.2 Economical

Economics was defined as a flagship to boost development in Udon Thani, so city agencies tried to set up projects to support city growth. In Udon Thani, various agencies have promoted tourism by restoring historic sites and natural attractions. The activity was supported by government and local community, while the private sector provided financial help for the activity. The process of activity allowed various agencies to participate in the activity and linked the activity to other development projects for collective benefits, for instance, planning the tram simulator project to connect major tourism sites within Udon Thani and constructing a tourism center and OTOP shop. Moreover, city agencies are working on the project of bicycle route construction to promote bicycle activity for health and for reducing traffic congestion in the city. The activity has been conducted by setting a discussion stage to gain feedback and suggestions from city stakeholders. A tram project was also introduced for reducing traffic congestion by persuading persons to use the tram, especially during the prime times. To achieve the projects, the governor has established a foundation of strategic development to study the possibilities for the projects. However, the projects are in the process of project feasibility studies.

From the abovementioned activities, the key to the activities is the cooperation between the government sector, private sector, and public sector in city management by focusing on the collective benefits of Udon Thani.

5.2.3 Physical and Environmental

Regarding the growth of the city which took place rapidly, the growth caused impacts on and significant changes to the physical environment of the city. Residents who live within the city center and suburbs started taking interest in the issues and expressing their feedback on social networks. In addition, some residents or NGOs tried to group persons concerned with the same issues and set small stages to discuss the issues. Physical and environmental issues were key issues that have affected the city significantly. Issues that Udon Thani is dealing with include traffic congestion, waste disposal, and flooding. However, it was found that activities that were conducted by the public sector were not of as much interest to the government or private sectors.

5.3 Conditions Influenced the Social Cohesion of City Development by Public Sector

5.3.1. Issues and Impact of Rapid Urbanization

Social Cohesion is considered as a tool to deal with urbanization issues. Social cohesion is a cohesive society works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of

belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility. While the notion of ‘social cohesion’ is often used with different meanings, its constituent elements include concerns about social inclusion, social capital and social mobility. (OECD, 2011) For urbanization issue as well, social cohesion might be an appropriate choice to deal with urbanization issues, which were quite complicated and need the responses from city stakeholders.

Regarding the city boundary which was rapidly expanding in all directions, this affected relations between cities that were very close to each other. In Udon Thani, the city has related to other cities in the Indo-China region such as Vientiane, Lao PDR. Therefore, issues and impact of the city expansion could hardly affect people in the city, both local citizens and migrants. This condition was the catalyst that boosted public sector recognition and drew more attention to the issues. Groups in the public sector tried to discuss and exchange ideas, knowledge, and experience to find the best solution for the city and meet the needs of people in the future.

5.3.2 Communication Technology

Communication technology currently is considered a crucial tool to group the city societies. Technology could help local people access information related to city planning, especially via social networking, which is popular at present. Social networks are a tool to access information and could exchange information between persons rapidly. This is another factor which boosted social cohesion in Udon Thani city.

The two conditions reflected a view of social groups appearing in Udon Thani to participate in city management. City management should be conducted based on the participation of city stakeholders, including the public sector, which was directly affected by city policy. Social cohesion for exchanging knowledge, experiences, and ideas about the city issues related to urbanization and urban development was an interesting alternative choice.

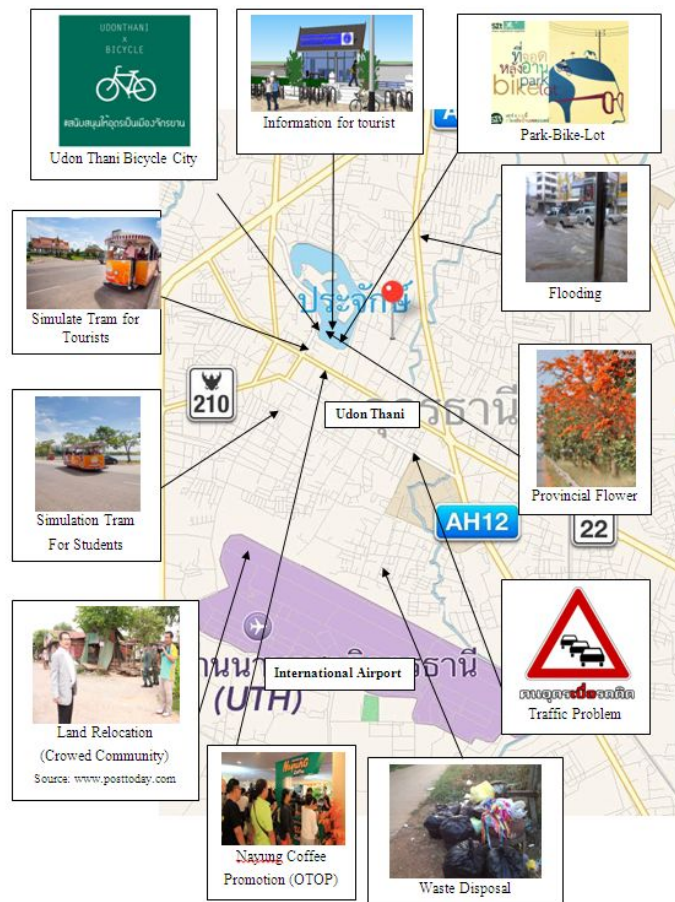


Figure 3. The Best Practices from City Stakeholders for Developing Udon Thani

The activity was conducted by persons who got direct effect from urban development, while the social network would be used as a tool to share information with the public. During the discussion process, urban issues would be raised up by participants and discussed. There were 4 points that participants had to realize, including the

following: 1) The group would raise clear issues or impacts. 2) No group leader or formal organization would be present during this discussion stage. 3) Participants would be equal. 4) Output of the discussion generated by the collective should benefit the city.

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The results of the discussion would be summarized and applied to the next discussion until a conclusion was reached and presented to the public and government agencies related to city development.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

An interesting point from social cohesion which occurs in the present found that most of the discussion participants were middle class people with easy access to technological tools. Although there are more channels to access communication technology, people who have low incomes are still struggling to earn more income for living in the city. Although this group realizes they are directly affected and are concerned with the city problems, they still lack access to information. Due to their working conditions, it is quite difficult to see a group established by lower-income people. This topic should be of concern to the government and private sectors, and these sectors should be concerned with providing proper tools for accessing information, and with allowing more opportunity for participation.

Urbanization in Thailand and other major cities in the Southeast Asia region has been determined by the central government. The city administrators tried to use economics as a flagship of development, while some cities defined themselves as the center of transportation, center of education, and center of tourism. These policies were essential to require cooperation from the public sector because they were persons directly affected by the development plan. City administrators should advise the public sector about appropriate guidelines. Another is decentralization; the decentralization of authority from central government to local government should be applied. This is one strategy to promote the good governance of city administration to city stakeholders. In addition, both the public sector and the private sector should be allowed to participate in policy issuance to lead the city to develop with a good balance in economic, social, and environmental perspectives.

7. Suggestion for Sustainable City

Every city expects for the commercial oriented approach to be a key that leads the development of the city by supporting investors from inside and outside the community to invest in the city. However, experiences from other cities in Southeast Asia showed that a city experiencing rapid growth would have some problems. Though the city economy was growing, it caused many problems such as lack of infrastructure, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, etc. This was called "over-urbanization" (Kioe Sheng, 2012). This study found that the growth direction of UdonThani is running the same as other cities. Therefore, city stakeholders should brainstorm to find out the development approach that suits the city. Sustainable development has been introduced as a solution. The city plan based on sustainable development would make the city balance between economics, social issues, environment, and natural resources. Every type of city stakeholder would have the chance to participate in city policy issuing.

The sustainable city is applied by many cities over the world such as Singapore, Stockholm, Yokohama, etc. These cities applied the sustainable concept and focused on the participation of city stakeholders in city development. Some related concepts include Smart Growth City's (The American Planning Association, APA, 2009) statement "Encourage community and stakeholders collaboration," which was the same as the concept of Ecological Cities as Economic Cities Concept (World Bank, 2009). These concepts focused on participation of city stakeholders and collaboration of development. Lastly, the researcher believes that to promote UdonThani as a sustainable city, participation of city stakeholders must be important especially in the public sector.

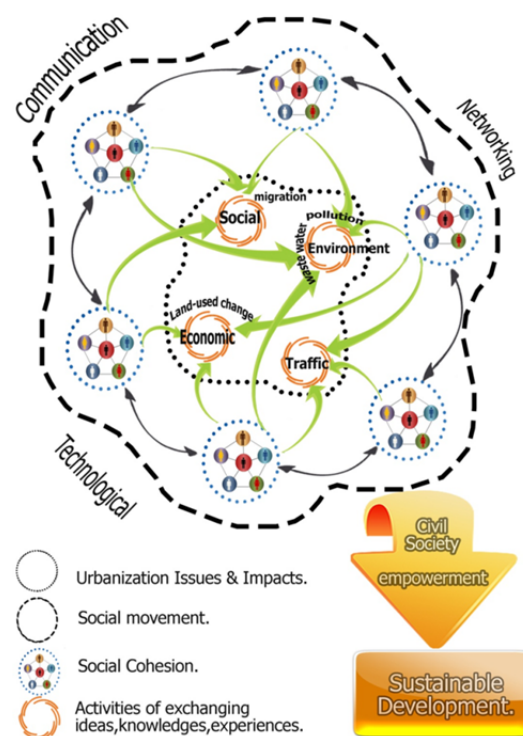


Figure 4. Social cohesion of city development by public sector

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