Perceptions of Local Government in Thailand: Views of People and Local Administrators

Sarunya Ruangwicha, Peerasit Kamnuansilpa and Supawatanakorn Wongthanavasu, College of Local Administration, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, st.sarunya@gmail.com

Abstract

The objective of this research project was to study perceptions about local government and administrators in local administrative organizations (LAOs) in Thailand. Data were collected from three categories of individuals: (1) local political officers; (2) government civil servants assigned to the LAO; and (3) the local populace. This study was conducted in the provinces of Khon Kaen, Chiang Mai, Chonburi and Songkhla. The study found that the political officers and the civil servants viewed the LAO as responsible for supporting the mission of the Bangkok-based, centrally controlled provincial administrative system. By contrast, the general population had the view that the LAO has the responsibility to solve all that problems that arise in the locality. Regarding the line of command, the local political officers felt that the population is their boss, while the civil servants saw the high-level government officers of the Ministry of Interior as their commanders. The local populace viewed the elected political officers as representatives of the community who have volunteered to serve and are, therefore, not in a position to boss the local electorate. Concerning the benefits of local government, the three groups of respondents see the LAO as being highly beneficial for the local population, especially in the following three areas: (1) developing the physical infrastructure; (2) improving the quality of life; and (3) instilling a democratic mind set in the population.

Keywords: Local Government, Local Administration, People’s Views

Introduction

Local administration in Thailand originated through a process of legislation and the initiative of national administrators. It was not the result of the traditional culture or lifestyle of the population as documented in other countries with strong local administrative systems. Local administration in Thailand was first instituted in 1933 when King Rama VII expressed the view that people in local areas required local administration in order to learn more about and develop the principles of democracy. This royal vision was the starting point for the local administrative movement in the county (Chayabutr, 1996).

In 1994, the Thai Parliament approved legislation to create the local Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) and a formal mechanism for local government management. The TAO was vested with the responsibility to address the hardships and promote the happiness of the local population.

By creating the TAO, the Provincial Administration Organizations (PAO) were left with fewer responsibilities and less authority. Thus a restructuring was required and, in 1997 a new law was passed which specified the revised role and area of jurisdiction of the PAO (See: http://www.nakhonsi.go.th/index.php?name=data&file=readdata&id=1).
The decentralization of local administration to the provincial and subprovincial levels led to the emergence of many different formats of local administrative organization (LAO). These include the standard PAO, three sizes of Municipalities (City, Town and Tambon) and the special cases of administrative structures for Bangkok and Pattaya.

The Thai constitution (1997), Article 285, specified new procedures for electing the chief executive officers for the different types of LAO including, Mayors, Chief Executive Officers of the PAO and TAO. The methodology was changed from indirect to direct electoral procedures. This rendered the Thai political system to have a more democratic foundation, and gave more authority to the populace in choosing their local administrators without having to go through a local council as before (See: http://www.nakhonsi.go.th/index.php?name=data&file=readdata&id=11). In fact, through these changes, local administration became more democratic than the national government in which the population does not directly elect the Prime Minister.

However the more direct process of selecting the local administration does not guarantee that the elected officers will always perform in accordance with principles of good governance, or effectively and efficiently address and resolve local grievances. If all actors in the system of local administration comprise of local political officers, government civil servants and the populace are not cognizant of the function and benefits of local government, this will undermine or reduce the potential benefits to the citizens and the country as a whole. Thus, it is important to study the knowledge and understanding of local administrative practices in all three groups of stakeholders. This study focused on three areas of interest: (1) Mission of the LAO; (2) Line of command and persons who the political officers and civil servants are accountable to; and (3) Benefit of the LAO.

Significance of Perception
The organizational behavior of humans has been addressed by a variety of theories and view points; describing the behavior depends on which school of thought one adopts for the purpose. Similarly, the behavior of members of an LAO can be interpreted from different angles. In this study, the researchers wanted first to understand behavior from the social psychological perspective.

From this conceptual approach there is no absolute truth or absolute fact in the entity of interest since the truth is relative to one's perspective (Foucault, M. 1991; Rabinow, Paul 1991). This approach is postmodernist in the sense that truth is defined by the political authority figures in a given society. A corollary of this relativity of absolute truth or facts is that perception is the only reality. The understanding of how human knowledge is processed can explain behavior, regardless of whether the knowledge is correct or appropriate (and not necessarily factual). Thus, unskillful perception could have negative consequences for human opportunity or, worse, could lead to ruination.

Not long after Thailand established the TAO and PAO, with a status of being a legal entity outside the direct line of command of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), as acted by the provincial governor, some perceived that these LAO were inherently corruptible and irregular (Anusorn Limanee et al, 2004; Sirichai Supsiri; 2010). This negative attitude led to a movement to abolish the LAO mechanism, without any objective analysis of whether there was corruption and, if so, to what degree. Every government ministry has some level of corruption and unethical behavior. Further, the LAO should not be assumed to be any different or worse in this regard. In fact, statistical data suggest that the LAO have helped to reduce the level of corruption and unethical behavior.
more efficiently than line ministries. One research study has found that corruption in the TAO, Municipality and PAO declined from 9.8% to 4.7% based on the experience of those having contact with the government (Komgrit Rachawiang, 2012). But this finding is not widely known or accepted by the public and national administrators.

This example suggests that people see what they want to believe. If the LAO system is abolished based on unskillful perception, then Thailand might lose the opportunity to strengthen local administration as has been achieved in other more socio-economically advanced countries.

This study proposes the additional viewpoint that, when studying or evaluating the efficiency or effectiveness of LAO in meeting the needs and addressing the problems of their constituency, it is necessary to first determine what the understanding and knowledge is of the LAO officials about their role and responsibility. While it was not possible to study every facet of the multitude of work of the LAO, this study focused on individuals with direct involvement in public services, including the following: (1) Elected administrative leaders of the LAO; (2) Members of the electorate who seek services from the LAO; and (3) Permanent government civil servants who implement the work in accordance with the policy assigned by the politicians.

Methods and Source of Data
Data were collected from the four provinces of Khon Kaen, Chiang Mai, Chonburi and Songkla. In-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of the chief or deputy-chief officer of the LAO, president or vice-president of the local council, members of the LAO council, and government civil servants. A total of 247 persons in these positions provided data. In addition, data were collected through 20 group discussions with a sample of the population in the LAO area. Each group comprised 8 to 12 discussants for a total of 230 persons. The data were subjected to content analysis. The results follow.

Findings
This study analyzed the information across three dimensions: (1) LAO mission; (2) Line of reporting and persons to be accountable to; and (3) Benefits of local government via the LAO.

Knowledge of the Mission: This study found that the political officers and civil servants agreed that the local administration can be classified into seven categories: (1) Infrastructure; (2) Promoting quality of life; (3) Community and social organization and promoting security; (4) Promoting commercial investment and tourism; (5) Management and conservation of the natural resources and the environment; (6) Protecting the traditional arts, culture, customs, religious practices and traditional wisdom; and (7) Supporting the activities of the central government and the LAO. By contrast, the members of the general population view local administration as something that should be proximal and dedicated to solving the problems of the locality. They view that the LAO has not been as responsive as possible since it lacks flexibility due to restrictions and control from central authorities.

Knowledge of accountability and lines of authority of the LAO: This study found that the political officers and civil servants have differing views on this. The political staff view the local electorate as their key constituency whom they must listen to and obey. By contrast, the civil servants do not refer to their obligation as public servants as a basis for their decision-making. Instead, they see themselves as representatives of the government and need to follow the directives of their superiors in the MOI, more than following political priorities.
This is because the civil servants see themselves as permanent administrators while the elected administrators may come and go. This reduces the civil servants' sense of responsibility to the local electorate.

When looking specifically at issues of accountability and lines of command, the local community residents expressed confusion in this area. They realize that the elected officials are their representatives who volunteered to serve them in this capacity. That said, the community residents felt that the uniform worn by, tasks and culture of the officials in the LAO resembled a typical government office. Thus, the respondents did not see how their elected representatives could influence decisionmaking of the permanent civil servants if they did not hold positions of authority. The respondents also knew that they can file grievances with the chief officer of the LAO when implementation is flawed. They also understand clearly that the elected representatives represent the community, not the central government representative. The local politicians were not viewed as civil servants or a formal part of the provincial administration.

**Knowledge of the benefit of local administration:** This study found that, overall, all three groups of respondents agreed that the LAO are very beneficial for the population, especially in the areas of physical infrastructure, quality of life development, and instilling a democratic mind-set in the population, which is the foundation for socio-economic development in Thailand. Most importantly, the LAO teach the population that their involvement and influence do not end with the election. Instead they must continually participate and inspect the work of the LAO.

**Discussion**

This study found that the political officers and permanent civil servants had a normative understanding of the mission of local administration, regardless of how well they implement that mission. Concerning accountability, their knowledge reflects personal interaction, and this determines whether the results of LAO activity confer true benefit to the population. Regarding the benefit of local administration, the perception of this is attitudinal, and may not reflect actual achievements or outcomes. Nevertheless, this study documented positive attitudes toward the political process and local administration. Thus, when using classical social psychological theory to analyze these findings, the results are favorable. If the attitudes are favorable, and there are genuinely favorable outcomes of the LAO, which are of good quality and sustainable, then the benefit of local administration will have been realized.

The extent to which the findings of this study can attribute results or outcomes of the LAO in accordance with administrative guidelines under principles and policies of decentralization is questionable. This study did not measure administrative behavior of the political section or civil servant department, and did not directly assess the performance of the LAO in question. Nevertheless, this study suggests the need for a further research into the relationship between results of local administration and public attitudes toward local administration (with segregated analysis of the political and civil servant components). This would cover the effectiveness of the outcomes and the appreciation of the population toward the LAO.

Future research should use a two-dimensional analysis of the following: (1) Analysis of the relationship of attitudes of the three categories of respondents (political officials, civil servants, the electorate); and (2) Analysis of the relationships of attitude scores by group with administrative behavior or performance of the LAO.
In addition, these attitude scores could be subjected to analysis in an additive model or an interaction model approach.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations from this study can be divided into two categories: (1) Technical; and (2) Administrative policy.

While this study suggests a relationship between knowledge and attitudes, it is inconclusive regarding the relationship between attitudes and behavior or outcomes of the work of the LAO. At the same time, no research has tested the hypothesis that the achievements of local administration will be appreciated by the population and consistent with principles of good governance. That would depend on how knowledge interacts with attitudes toward local administration as an intermediate variable.

The assumption that positive attitudes will affect the work leads to the policy recommendation that the building of the capacity of LAO management, in the near-term, should focus on the political officers, and ensure that existing staff of the LAO have the correct knowledge and positive attitudes toward local administration, with complete and correct knowledge of their responsibilities. Then, the focus can be on developing the capacity of the new generation of LAO staff so that they have positive knowledge and attitudes toward local administration. This needs a careful identification of issues of emphasis and target groups in order to be effective. Initially, building the capacity for administration and the implementation by the LAO needs to focus on the existing labor force in the LAO, since every member of the Thai public is eligible to receive services from its respective LAO. At the very least, this study points to the fact that the existing workers in the LAO have different levels of knowledge about local administration. For example, the civil servants have a more disparate view of local administration than the political officers. That is, the civil servants see local administration as an extension of permanent government work. Thus, if the political officers, the civil servants and the general populace have a different view, any curriculum for building capacity in administration and modification of attitudes needs to take into consideration a different emphasis, depending on which group is being trained. As for the general populace, they need to be more cognizant of their role as citizens with civil responsibilities. They should not view themselves as service recipients only. At present, segments of the general population are unclear about their role, and many see themselves as social welfare recipients as opposed to a contributor toward a better society.

**References**


Nakhonsithammaraja Provincial Administrates Organization. "History and Development of Authority and Functions," (Written in Thai)

