

CHAPTER 3

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THE EMERGING ROLE OF CITIZENS IN PLANNING AND PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING IN THAILAND

Abstract In this chapter, the authors examine the general concept of citizen participation and then consider the factors that are shaping the emerging role of citizens in planning and public decision-making in Thailand. Although public involvement of citizens is ordinary in the United States and other Western democracies, citizen participation is less common in Thailand, and may take different forms. Citizen involvement in Thailand is looked at in a broad perspective, inclusive of various influences, such as culture, religion, governmental structure, and national history. The authors contend that citizen participation is beginning to occur in Thailand, often through informal means, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). NGOs have found a niche in involving Thai citizens mainly on local issues. As the concept of Thai citizen involvement continues to emerge, it will take the unique characteristics of Thai culture into account and will build on existing methods of participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The active involvement of local citizens in the development of public policy affecting their daily lives is a relatively recent phenomenon, even in Western democracies. One can trace democratic participation in the United States to the founding of the nation, but citizens' involvement in public decision-making has become a systematic practice outside the election process only in the last 40 years (Darke, 2000, 385-386; Thomas, 1995, 1-8; Langton, 1978, 104). As Western forms of citizen participation¹ have become more widely accepted and more fully institutionalized, international agencies that provide funding and technical support to developing countries have insisted the countries involve citizens in the planning process. Even so, the Western ideal of citizen participation is less well established in many other parts of the world.

In this chapter, we examine the emerging role of citizens in planning and public decision-making in Thailand. First, we discuss the general concept of citizen participation in planning in the United States. Second, we consider Thailand's political structure, history, cultural themes, and other factors that may influence citizen involvement in that country. Third, we assess the possible nature and future direction of Thai citizen involvement. Finally, we briefly discuss implications of citizen participation for planning and sustainable development in Thailand. Our findings are based on case study methodology employed during a visiting scholar

appointment at Chulalongkorn University in fall 1997 and on the Joint Study field project in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in summer 1998. The methodological tools supporting the case study are literature review, interviews, and field observations conducted during the two visits.

1.1. History of Citizen Participation

Planners and social activists in the United States have long stressed the importance of participation by citizens in public affairs. For many years, the citizen's role in public decision-making was viewed simply as involvement in the elective process through participation in political parties, or in some parts of the country through town meetings. After World War II, however, and especially since the 1960s, citizens' participation in planning and decision-making has become routine in many mainstream public agencies. Today almost all such agencies encourage citizens to participate in planning and policy making in some form, ranging from simple surveys to advisory boards (Thomas, 1995, 1-8).

The rise of public participation over the last 40 years has several explanations, including institutional developments such as the decline of political party strength at the local level, increased bureaucratic decision-making, a shift in public values related to the administrative decision-making process, and widespread publicity about governmental problems in the mass media (Darke, 2000, 385-386; Thomas, 1995, 1-8; Langton, 1978, 104). According to Desario and Langton, the expanding role of government as a provider of public services also has led to greater public decision-making at all levels of government. Bureaucrats now routinely consult citizens as often as they consult technical experts, especially in matters of health, education, transportation, and environmental planning. In many cases, agencies are legally required to seek the views of the public on matters of public policy (Darke, 2000, 385; Desario and Langton, 1987, 1-5).

1.2. Citizen/Public Participation Defined

Citizen participation, much like the planning profession, is a broad field. This subject has been discussed widely, and numerous definitions have been offered. One of the earliest definitions used by planners comes from the classic article by Sherry Arnstein (1969), who defines citizen participation as citizen power. "It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future" (Arnstein 1969, 216). She makes the point that citizen participation without redistribution of power is a meaningless exercise for the powerless. If the power holders are the only ones who make the decisions, then the status quo is maintained and true citizen participation has not occurred. Although Arnstein's definition may imply certain political and philosophical viewpoints, it has merit for planners. The model helps to illustrate the different levels of citizen participation, their gradations, and some of the serious problems present at lower levels. Later writers have

modified Arnstein's ladders or proposed their own model for meaningful citizen involvement in public decision-making (Darke, 2000, 388-391).

Public participation has many names: citizen involvement, community involvement, and participatory decision-making, among others. Traditionally the concept was identified with citizens' political activities including voting, campaigning, and lobbying by special interest groups such as unions and environmental groups. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was broadened to include involvement in administrative processes. Encouraged in part by the emergence of grassroots organizations and by the community development planning model, which focuses on helping people to help themselves improve their conditions, public participation is now defined in terms of "influence" or "being part of the process." Public participation also implies that some power or authority will support the participants' preferences and demands. Thus, citizen participation entails being involved before decisions are made rather than merely being allowed to comment after the fact or making choices from a predetermined list of options. Most proponents of public participation, both within agencies and among community members and stakeholders, recognize the advantages of allowing citizens to participate in the planning and decision-making process. Among these benefits are improvements in the quality of decisions and plans, building public support for and increasing the likely success of a project, and satisfying legal responsibilities and obligations (Anderson and Yaffe, 1998, 12).

As planning and other public agencies have moved away from a "decide-announce-defend" approach and toward more open planning and policy development, various methods for involving citizens have emerged, including public meetings and workshops, referendums, surveys, the review and comment process, advisory groups, and public outreach through media and other information channels. A wide array of techniques for soliciting informed comments has been developed, such as Delbecq's nominal group technique, the Delphi technique, charettes, and presentation of alternative plans (Darke, 2000, 392-93; Thomas, 1995, 153; Kweit and Kweit, 1987, 31-32; Langton, 1978, 121; Rosenbaum, 1976, 55).

Planners from the United States, as well as Thai planners and administrators trained in the United States and other Western nations, approach the concept of citizen participation from the perspective discussed above. Although many conventional Western techniques and methods are beginning to be employed in Thailand, the country's unique history, culture, and political system ultimately will shape and define meaningful citizen participation.

2. THE HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THAILAND

Thailand is one of the few nations in Southeast Asia that was never colonized by a Western nation. As a result, the country's political system has evolved based on its own culture and circumstances. For centuries, a small elite who surrounded the monarch held political power and was believed to possess superior intellectual ability and moral excellence. Even today, under a constitutional monarchy, the king

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