

# COLLABORATIVE NETWORK ACTIVITIES OF THAI SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS: CURRENT PRACTICES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

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## ABSTRACT

*This article provides a systematic analysis of collaborative network activities in Thai subnational governance after the implementation of administrative devolution policy in 1999. Two hundred and eighteen cases classified into three policy areas: environmental management and natural resource preservation, public welfare, and education and cultural programs, are examined regarding modes of networked collaborations, network sizes, and network partners and their contributions to networks. Findings show that networked arrangements are diverse, with the average number of partners of five, and are common when local governments deal with environmental management, natural resources and public welfare program. But it is not the case for the educational policy area. Also found is that civic groups are very active local partners. However, national and regional governmental agencies do not engage much in promoting the work of local partnerships. Likewise, collaboration among local governments is rare. These issues raise future challenges for enhancing local network collaboration and especially for redesigning future devolution policies.*

## INTRODUCTION

Collaborative networks have evolved as a key strategy in public-policy making and implementation (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Bardach 1998; Frederickson 1999; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Meier and O'Toole 2003; O'Toole 1996, 1997). Public administrators nowadays live in a networked environment, collaborating with their partners in order to accomplish increasingly complex tasks. So far, scholars have documented this phenomenon in a number of policy areas and suggest that public administrators take networking approaches seriously as well as devoting substantial efforts in dealing with these interdependent environments (Provan and Milward 1995; O'Toole 1996, 1997; O'Toole and Meier 1999).

To date, very little is known about networked arrangement at the subnational government level in Thailand. Since the country's implementation of comprehensive devolution programs in 1999, it is worth asking whether local public administration is moving towards more political responsiveness and democratic governance. Therefore, my objective is to investigate what is out there in networked public administration in Thai subnational governance. Empirical data will be utilized for this purpose.

Data are obtained from research conducted during 2003-2005. Of 218 cases derived from field detailed surveys, they fall into three major local policy areas: Environmental

management and natural resource preservation, Social and public welfare, and education and cultural promotion. These case studies will be examined regarding modes of networked collaborations, partners and their contributions to networks. Case data are coded and subsequently analyzed to answer my research questions.

This article is divided into the following sections. The first section presents the devolution context in Thailand. The second section provides the overview of recent local networked management. The third section delineates data and methods used in the study whereupon illustrative cases will be provided. Data analysis is the subject of the subsequent section whereby network characteristics and activities of partnerships will be investigated in detail. Lastly, the article analyzes key findings and policy implications regarding the utilization and future challenges of collaborative network management.

### **THE DEVOLUTION CONTEXT**

Thailand is a unitary democratic state, incorporating national, regional, and local administration, and is governed by a parliamentary system. The executive branch of the central government is composed of 20 ministries, whereas regional administration is merely a territorial extension of the central government and has neither absolute autonomy nor authority over policy making and administration. By contrast, local governments are self-governing bodies. Presently, there are about eight thousand units of local governments.

The country has implemented a comprehensive devolution policy since 1999 under the promulgation of the Decentralization Plan and Process Act of 1999. Basically, decentralization policy was a part of the country's administrative and political reforms since the military coup in May 1992 (UNDP 2003). Failures in country management in the past led to the realization that a centralized public administration was one of the major causes of the country's political and economic instability. Public sentiment has thus called for decentralized administration, devolving fiscal resources and responsibilities of peripheral public services into the hands of local governments, as a means to promote a smaller and more transparent national government, and to promote local democratic governance.

The Decentralization Plan and Process Act of 1999 stipulated that some services that were originally the responsibility of national governments should be devolved into the hands of local governments<sup>1</sup>. These services are, for example, local and community planning and development; promotion of local economic development, investment, employment, trade, and tourism; local public services provision, including local roads, local public transportation system, public markets, ports and docks, waste treatment, water drainage system, local public utilities, parks and recreation, garbage collection, pet controls, slaughtering, community public safety, preservation of community natural resources and environmental protection, communal disaster control, sanitation and cremation services; and social welfare services provision, including primary and secondary education, social welfare for children and for the elderly and disabilities in community, primary health care and medical services, housing and restoration, community arts and cultures.

In tandem with devolved service responsibilities, the central government also devolved a greater degree of fiscal autonomy (including human resource management) to local governments. Basically, local revenues come from four major sources, (1) locally collected revenues (taxes, fees, charges, permits, fines, etc.), (2) local revenues collected by central government agencies (VAT, excises, vehicle, land registration, and etc.), (3) revenue sharing, and (4) grants. Of these totals, grants and local taxes collected by central agencies as well as revenue sharing constitute 58.2% and 20.5%, respectively; while locally collected amount is 21.3% in fiscal year 2005 (Ministry of Finance, Thailand). Intergovernmental grants and transfers are often allocated on an equal basis and ignore local fiscal capacity<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, local authorities have access to bond issuing and debt financing. However, they are under the stringent control of the Ministry of Interior and the cabinet's approval.

Accountability systems have been institutionalized to ensure the interest of local residents. Local residents have the rights to recall votes and to throw out of office elected local officials deemed irresponsible or dishonest. Transparency in local administration and civic participation are now legally legitimate. Legal frameworks stipulate civic participations in local planning and budgeting, the dissemination of information by local authority, the audit of local financial and performance reports by external auditors (Auditor General and Ministry of Interior), and civic involvement in procurements and monitoring the exercise of state power.

To date the devolution progress is growing, but somewhat slow according to the decentralization law. While significant transfers of service functions have occurred in infrastructure, natural resources and environmental management, and quality of life, the devolutions of health care and educational services have not yet been taken place. Civil servants in the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education are reluctant to transfer to local authorities (Bowornwathana 2006; Nelson 2002; Smoke 2005), mainly, as they believe, due to the fear of career advancement and fringe benefits and due to the lack of confidence in the capability of local governments to assume the services (Nelson 2002).

The effectiveness of accountability control was limited due to the inadequacy of auditing all local authorities, the continuing uses of traditional budgeting and accounting practices (line-item budgeting and cash-basis accounting procedures), and the ineffective use of performance management system. As a result, the general public hardly knows whether local expenditures meet their promises or whether program objectives have been materialized. In addition, civic participation, though blossomed in the past few years, still was less intense by western standards and often concentrated within small residential groups (Smoke 2005; Suwanmala 2007; White and Smoke 2005).

## **MANAGING NETWORKS IN THAI LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

Fundamentally, local governments are incorporated by the principle of self-governing. Each local government consists of the executive body and the local council, each of which is headed by locally elected persons from local residents and serves a four-year term. The elected executive, so-called mayor for municipality (1,276 units) or chairman

for Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO, 75 units) and for Tambon (subdistrict) Administrative Organization (TAO, 6,500 units)<sup>3</sup>, is the top political head of local executive bodies and is held accountable to local council and to residents. He or she is also responsible for preparing local development policies and annual budgets which will be scrutinized and officially adopted by the council. These three types of general forms of local governments are uniformly applied in all 75 provinces, and are classified into two-tier governing system<sup>4</sup>.

As a result of close proximity to local constituencies, policy formulation and implementation of Thai local governments usually is pursued through networks. Networked management occurs in various policy areas and incorporates diverse partners; for instance; regional branch offices of national government agencies, local occupational groups, non-profit organizations, local business units, community volunteered groups, and international development organizations. Simultaneously, civic participation in local public affairs has blossomed gradually since the wide-scale democratic reform after the military coup in 1992 (UNDP 2003). Several success stories exhibit this fact (Kokpon 2003; Krueathep 2004; Suwanmala 2007), including case studies to be explored in this article, although the magnitude of civic participation is still limited by the western standard (White and Smoke 2005; Smoke 2005).

The reason for local networks is mainly due to institutional limitations of local government units. As commonly known, the majority of Thai local governments, particularly TAOs<sup>5</sup>, possess very limited organizational capacities both in terms of human and financial resources as well as the degree of knowledge accumulation (Bowornwathana 2006; Green 2005). Therefore, the collaborative approach is an attractive method for many local administrators in order to mitigate these institutional constraints.

Moreover, the devolution movement has pushed forward public participation as a means to monitor local government performance and to hold them accountable to local constituency (Suwanmala 2004, 2007; UNDP 2003; White and Smoke 2005). Thai scholars and practitioners alike have advocated participatory approaches in order that local residents can express their views and defend their rights to give their voices to local public-policy making and implementation. Nowadays, people and local advocacy groups have the right to be involved in developing local policies, making decisions on critical issues, providing views and information regarding local development plans and budgets, and inspecting the exercise of local government power. These have laid the foundation for more accessible and accountable local government.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

This article examines 218 cases of the management of local programs in Thailand, most of which have been pursued through collaborative networks. These case studies are selected from a pool of 529 good-practice cases, obtained from the “Thailand’s Local Government Initiatives Research Project,” carried out during 2003-2005, and covering wide geographical (North, Northeast, Central, and South) as well as local policy areas. The project was financially supported by Thailand Research Fund (TRF).

The main purpose of this research is to evaluate administrative adjustments of local governments after the 1999 devolution. We aimed to collect in-depth good-practice cases of local programs that were initiated *after* or *as a result of* the 1999 national decentralization movement<sup>6</sup>. The majority of our cases (about 79.6 percent) took place between 2001 and 2003. Our research goal was to collect cases with rich detailed information on what programs were implemented, why and how they were implemented, who was involved in policy formation and implementation processes, what kind of resources were utilized, and what the program results were. The final cases went through several data collection and validation processes.

First, we conducted a mail survey from a list of localities to acquire preliminary data in order to ascertain if they have initiated new administrative arrangements that have the potential to develop as a case study. The survey covered all 75 provinces, except Bangkok, which was carried out during June to August 2003. Then, short telephone conversations (about 15-30 minutes) were made from the survey responses to ensure that the short-listed cases met our research purposes.

Next, field researchers visited local government sites to complete in-depth interviews with local politicians, administrators and city residents in order to acquire detailed information about the origins, strategic implementations, obstacles and results of each case. Researchers also examined relevant documents such as official budgets, memoranda of management and community meetings, case evaluations, annual reports, newsletters, or photographs. All cases were collected by using a uniformed data collection sheet and field researchers were required to participate in a two day workshop before starting the data collection processes. Each case usually takes two man-days to complete the form. This phase took place during September 2003 and April 2005.

The compiled data from the fields were then reported to and re-examined by our investigator teams. After checking for their completeness, the potential cases were sent back to respective local administrators to have them rechecked and validated. The investigators screened out deficient cases and eventually developed 529 full cases. This step took place concurrently from January 2004 to June 2005.

## Study Sample

In this article networked activities are examined from the case data specifically in three major local policy areas: (i) environmental management and natural resource preservation, (ii) social services and public welfare, and (iii) education and cultural promotion. These three policies are selected since, in Thailand and other countries alike, they constitute a large portion of local government's responsibilities. Understanding in these policy areas is beneficial to the overall betterment of local administration. Case data are originally in a text format and are carefully coded into numerical values in order to obtain key variables as suggested by my research questions. Table 1 summarizes the overview of these cases.

Table 1: Overview of Case Studies

Policy/Program areas	Number of Cases	Percentage
<b>Environment and Natural resource conservation</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>38.53</b>
- <i>Environmental management</i>	8	3.67
- <i>Forest preservation</i>	18	8.26
- <i>Water resources preservation</i>	14	6.42
- <i>Garbage and waste disposal</i>	44	20.18
<b>Social and public welfare</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>36.24</b>
- <i>Health care</i>	20	9.17
- <i>Social welfare</i>	18	8.26
- <i>Quality of life</i>	18	8.26
- <i>Anti-drug programs</i>	23	10.55
<b>Education and Cultural promotion</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>25.23</b>
- <i>Education</i>	32	14.68
- <i>Cultural promotion</i>	23	10.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Author, 2008.

The approach in this article is first to analyze key typologies of networked management in Thai local governments. Then, major collaborative activities will be examined in detail. This will help us understand who the local partners are and what contributions they bring to the partnerships.

#### Four Illustrative Cases

*Yala Municipality: Partnerships in Promoting Interactive Student Learning.* Yala municipality is a central city located in the far south with a population of about 76,500 in 2003. The city administers six municipal schools with the total number of primary-school students being approximately 1,700<sup>7</sup>. In 1999, National Parliament promulgated the National Education Act of 1999, which refocused pedagogical approaches from teacher-based and classroom orientation to student-based and flexible learning styles in order that children are able to develop mentally, physically, and socially.

City administrators initially grasped the idea of promoting student-based learning but still lacked a definite, tangible plan. After a series of consultations with two non-profit organizations, one for-profit organization, and teacher and parent associations, the city's idea was eventually materialized in late 1999. The initiative combines edutainment approaches with the development of new interactive learning facilities; namely the Exploring Park and Exploring Center (see Figure 1 and 2), aiming at stimulating a child's learning from a variety of play-and-learn activities.

Figure 1: Exploring Park (Landscape view)



Source: Author, 2008.

Exploring Center is an in-door learning facility for 11 different skills. Attending the center is a part of the school curriculum, incorporating a one-hour-per-week learning package. Exploring Park, on the other hand, is an out-door facility, consisting of seven exploring zones. The Park is open publicly for students and the general public. After all, this collaboration seems to provide satisfying results. The data of facility usages in 2001 indicates three to four thousand usages per month for the Exploring Park and about six to eight hundred usages per month for the Exploring Center. Additionally, satisfaction surveys revealed that more than 90 percent of students and teachers were highly satisfied with the facilities and interactive learning programs, and more than 60 percent of parents were very satisfied since they observed positive changes in children's behavior towards learning and going to school.

Figure 2: Exploring Park (Tower zone)



Source: Author, 2008.

*Pluak-Dang TAO: Contracting out Primary Health Services.* Pluak-Dang City is a small, rural-based society, with a population of approximately 5,600, and located in Rayong Province, the eastern part of the country. The majority of the population is relatively poor and performs agricultural and farm work for a living. They have neither basic health insurance nor receive basic health services from their government<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, due to

the total local personnel of 13 persons in the government, the city does not operate its own hospital nor directly provide primary healthcare.

This service deficiency has raised concerns for city administrators and local residents for several years. In February 2002, a year after the devolution programs became effective; the city mayor initiated a policy to have private contractors provide primary health services for local residents. The policy was submitted to the local council and to a public hearing in the city's civic meeting. Eventually, the proposed plan and operating budgets were approved three months later. The city then contracted with a private hospital in a nearby city to have two physicians and six nurses provide regular primary health services and biannual check-ups in designated community areas, free of charge to communal residents. In sum, this sort of partnership assists the city in expanding its service coverage to those in need and increases citizen satisfaction towards city government.

*Kud-Namsai TAO: Community-based Measures for Watershed Protection* Kud-Namsai city, located in Khon-Khan province with a population of about 7,000, is surrounded by fertile Nampong water sources. A majority of the population (about 80 percent) subsist on small fishing and agriculture. Thus, water sources are a major source of water supply and economic lifeblood to the community. Unfortunately, the encroachment of large factories to Kud-Namsai since late 1980s (electrical power generation and paper production industry) has caused serious water pollution to the community. Residents often find illegal dumping of hazardous waste into community waterways, where major hazards were observed in March 1992 and May 1993. However, they were not able to identify the origin of the waste disposal due to its non-observable chemical attributes.

At first, the residents responded by informing the factories to stop dumping industrial waste into the community waterways. They also reported the situation to government officials at the Department of Industrial Control, the Ministry of Industry, the Regional Office of the Environment Protection Department (REPD), and the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment. However, officials reacted feebly to the problem. They set up a small working group and monitored the quality of Nampong watersheds for only three months. Essentially, there was no punitive legal measure ever issued to the factories since no evidence of chemical hazard surfaced during the short monitoring period. Put differently, this action deterred the problem, but did not warrant the cease of hazardous waste disposal in the future. Things became worse in December 1997 when major waste disposal evidently caused the deaths of thousands of fish and aquatic lives. In effect, angry mobs and local media gathered outside the plants and blamed the plant management teams for irresponsible actions.

In effect, a collaborative working group was formed, with strong supports from the TAO, local environmental NGOs, local universities, World Health Organization (WHO), the REPD, and plant representatives who agreed to join and support the community in solving the problem. Initially, about 50 local residents volunteered to regularly monitor water quality in their neighborhood. They were intensively trained in the methods of scientific tests of water quality (e.g. Biochemical Oxygen Demand: BOD and Chemical Oxygen Demand: COD, Acid-Base (pH) test, etc.) and were provided with standard testing equipment, all supported for by the partners.

The volunteer group is divided into four sub-units, testing the samples of water from 15 predetermined locations throughout community waterways. The water sampling and quality testing is conducted once a month and will be increased up to three times a month during the rainy season (normally June - October). Water-quality testing data are then analyzed against scientifically accepted standards and reported to all parties concerned, including the plant operators and local residents. In addition, the city government established the Community Environment Information Center in early 1998 and has provided financial and logistical support for the work of the volunteer group.

Because of scientifically-based data, the reports are highly regarded as a good indication of community water-quality. They have a strong deterrent effect. No acute dumping of hazardous waste has been detected since 1998. This community-based action of water-quality monitoring initiative proves how the potential of collaboration and scientific knowledge can be transferred among network partners for the betterment of communal lives.

*Nasang TAO: Community Measures for Anti-drug Abuses and Trafficking.* Nasang TAO is a small local government (with five permanent staff in total) and is located in a small rural-based community in Lampang province, in northern Thailand, with a population of about 5,100. Basically, a primary relationship is dominant in the community. Social norms, both implicitly and explicitly established, have proven to be effective in enhancing social coherence in many circumstances.

In 1999, the problems of drug abuse and trafficking were found to be a problem with a number of juveniles in Nasang community. The Mayor of Nasang TAO took initial action by forming a small coalition group, consisting of TAO administrators and councilmen, village heads, and officials from regional government offices. They jointly assessed the magnitude of drug problems in the community, as well as foreseeable consequences if no action were taken. After realizing the seriousness of the problems, they all agreed that these issues should be addressed in the community's civic forum so that residents would be aware of them and that the problems would be thoroughly prevented.

The reason that the drug problems were addressed publicly depended largely on community relationships. Given the primacy of strong social norms in guiding individual behaviors in Nasang community, any corrective measures that are collectively structured will be followed strictly by individuals and reinforced through the manifold webs of city-village-household-individual relationships.

Essentially, the forum agreed to use soft corrective actions (community rules), rather than enforcing tough legal measures in the fight against drugs. First, they adopted a series of community rules, stipulating that: (1) first time drug users will be notified to cease using drugs. If they remain involved, then a second degree of public response is further enforced. For those Welfare benefits provided to individuals who are involved in drugs, it should be noted that the benefits will be suspended and drug users will be disassociated from community activities; (2) in the case of drug trafficking: the community will immediately sanction drug dealers from all kinds of services and welfare benefits received from the community. No interpersonal relationships with other community members will be allowed. When individuals completely sustain from drugs activities, then community relationships and welfare benefits will be resumed.

To this extent, the village heads and civic leaders from all neighborhoods worked collaboratively with the city officials and police to keep community residents under close surveillance regarding drug activities. In addition to social enforcement measures, the community also agreed to provide job opportunities and occupational training programs as incentives to assist addicts stay free from drug-related activities.

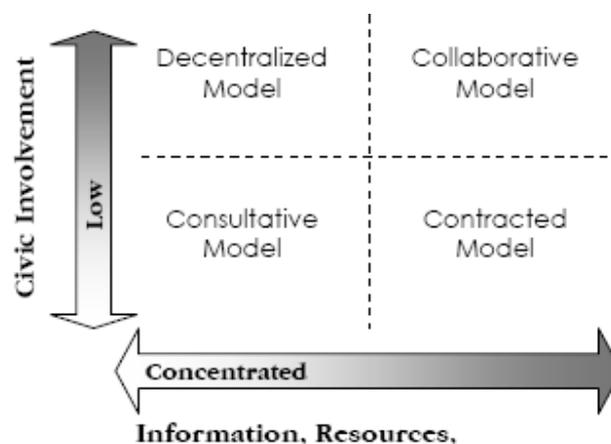
All these social measures proved effective in eradicating community drug problems. Prior to the use of social control measures, approximately 32 people were identified that were involved in drugs and were put under close community surveillance. After a year of social operations, these addicts were rehabilitated and returned to normal communal lives.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### A Typology of Networked Collaboration

Our cases studies reflect some major characteristics of collaboration. Specifically, the collaborative activities exhibit differences across two dimensions: (1) the degree of sharing of information, resources, and responsibility and (2) the degree of civic involvement in local public affairs. Given these two characteristics, four distinct types of networked management of Thai local governments are developed as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: A Typology of Network Strategic Choices



Source: Author, 2008

*I. Traditional Bureaucratic Model:* In this type, local government is an alone “doer” of service responsibilities. Civic involvement with localities and resource sharing are nil. Neither citizens nor civic organizations gain access to local agenda setting. Information is concentrated within the bureaucracy and service responsibilities are solely of the

authoritative-type doers. This group of local governments needs very little dependence on external resources or expertise. Note that none of our four illustrative cases belongs to this traditional administrative mode.

*II. Consultative Model:* In this model, local government still takes the lead in solving community problems or policy issues. Yet it is a bit more open to external ideas and information. Local administrators usually consult with partners when they need. However, the sole decision making authority is still situated in local bureaucracy. Only limited pieces of information or public participation is allowed when local policy windows are intermittently unlocked. In addition, this sort of partnerships does not last very long. The consultative process is usually disbanded when the emerging problem has been solved. The case of Yala Municipality falls into this type.

*III. Contracted Model:* This model is somewhat similar to the traditional public-private-partnership model, where the delivery of local public services is performed by contracting business sectors. The case of Pluak-Dang City exhibits this arrangement. Relationships between government and private sectors are somewhat formal and are regulated by explicit contract or agreement. The ultimate responsibility is shared between the contracted government and the contracting private organizations. These private sectors usually have management and resource autonomy, as well as financial obligations if their operations were unsuccessful, within a specified framework from the government. Information about service performance is often shared such that administrators can effectively monitor service performances of their private counterparts. Note, however, that civic involvement in this mode of local governance is still limited, mostly as passive service recipients.

*IV. Decentralized Model:* Local government in this type encourages a wide civic participation in local service deliveries. Citizens engage proactively and meaningfully in shaping the direction of local development with public administrators. Nonetheless, due to the nature of tasks, local government often facilitates local communities to take the lead in performing most of the tasks. Local authority may provide some form of financial or technical assistance to the operations of these civic associations. In effect, this “mediator/facilitator” government-type provides a great deal of implementation flexibility into the hands of communities. Communication and information sharing between local administrators and civic organizations are less frequent and mainly concentrated at the communal levels. Therefore, local administrators neither have complete information nor control over the communal groups. The volunteered group in monitoring water quality in Kud-Namsai City reveals this networked relationship.

*V. Collaborative Model:* In this type, several partners join local-affairs venue with dispersed missions. Local administrators are not dominant in network but just one among multiple players. Their key role is to be an “integrator” who forcefully drives the networks and skillfully balances the differences among distinct players. In this model, a sharing of information, expertise, and resources is common. The bottom-up participation from civic communities is also necessary to reap the benefits of citizen feedback on complex tasks. Success or failure depends largely on individual partner contributions to the network. Without any joint-action arrangement, the tasks can never be realized by the

action of any independent partners. Nasang's community measures for drug abuse represent this collaborative model.

### Analysis of Network Activities

This section describes the major collaborative activities of Thai local governments in detail. First, I elaborate an overview of collaborations across policy areas. Then, it examines the average size of networks, the composition of local government's partners, and the partners' contributions in networking activities. Table 2 exhibits the number of each type of networked collaboration for 218 cases, classified by three policy areas.

Table 2: Modes of Networked Collaborations Classified by Policy Areas

Modes of Collaborations		Policy Areas			Total
		Environment and Natural resource	Social and public welfare	Education and Cultural promotion	
Traditional Model	Count	8	15	16	39
	%	9.5%	19.0%	29.1%	17.9%
Consultative Model	Count	12	18	17	47
	%	14.3%	22.8%	30.9%	21.6%
Contracted Model	Count	7	4		11
	%	8.3%	5.1%		5.0%
Decentralized Model	Count	43	32	14	89
	%	51.2%	40.5%	25.5%	40.8%
Collaborative Model	Count	14	10	8	32
	%	16.7%	12.7%	14.5%	14.7%
Total	Count	84	79	55	218
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: For this table, Chi-square is 21.9 and Cramer's V is .224, p-value < .01

Source: Author, 2008.

At a glance, what this frequency table tells us is that the emergence of networked approaches in Thai local administration is very promising. The majority of local governments (about 82.1 percent) have adopted some form of collaborations when they implemented public programs. Of this figure, about 89 cases (or 40.8 percent) chose to decentralize service responsibilities to their civic counterparts. This conforms with my discussion above that several Thai local governments are relatively weak and, thus, prone to facilitate local community groups to bear service responsibilities.

Devolution policy may, in part, account for this positive trend. Local authorities have been allowed for greater administrative autonomy. At the same time, they have been overwhelmed with increasing service responsibilities. These push and pull factors may

force local administrators to seek partners as new administrative strategies, instead of performing all tasks alone, in order to ease their burdens.

What is intriguing from Table 2 is the pattern of networking *across policy areas*. Consider environmental management and natural resource preservation first. We can observe that more than half (about 68 percent) of local governments of this policy category chose either the Decentralized or Collaborative Forms. The same is also true for social and public welfare programs (about 53 percent). By contrast, collaborations in educational and cultural promotion programs are relatively restricted. The majority of local administrators (60 percent) prefer to carry out educational programs through their own effort or, at most, consulting intermittently with their outside partners.

Ironically, this is a warning sign for Thai local administrators in formulating and implementing educational or culture related programs. In many well developed societies, scholars and practitioners alike contend that higher educational achievements will be realized when local communities get involved in schooling (Bardach 1998; Hannaway 1993; OECD 1989; Meier and O'Toole, 2001; Smith and Wohlstetter, 2006; UNESCO, 2001; Weiler 1993). Partnerships in schooling may help schools increase service quality and educational outcomes by offering access to additional resources and the transfer of knowledge and expertise (Smith and Wohlstetter, 2006).

Therefore, partnership in local education and cultural program provision is a major challenge for Thai localities in the immediate future. As already discussed, the devolution of educational services in Thailand has not progressed much due partly to, as widely argued by school teachers and parents, the lack of adequate ability of localities to carry out educational tasks (Nelson, 2002). In this regard, education network might be an alternative way to develop the readiness of localities to effectively handle the devolved educational functions.

Now, one may ask how large the network partnerships are. One way to assess the size of networks is to examine the aggregate number of partners in networks (Graddy and Chen 2006). A general picture of the number of local partners is exhibited in Table 3. Of our 218 cases, the number of network partners ranges from zero (which means no partner at all) to 145 with the average of about 5 (median value). The majority of local governments (about 55.5 percent) have one to five partners. This average network size of five is somewhat similar to the finding of Graddy and Chen (2006), who found that the average size of network in social service delivery in Los Angeles County is about five. Note, however, that this comparison is only suggestive. Indeed, they are by no means comparable due to differences across administrative and civic cultures.

Table 3: Number of Network Partners

Total Number of Network Partners	Frequency (%)	Environment and Natural resource conservation	Social and public welfare	Education and Cultural promotion
None	7 (3.2)	2	3	2
1-5	121 (55.5)	39	41	41
6-10	38 (17.4)	16	14	8
11-20	32 (14.7)	17	14	1
20-50	16 (7.3)	7	7	2
> 51	4 (1.8)	3	0	1
Total	218 (100.0)	84	79	55
Means	8.95	12.14**	7.84**	5.69**
Median	5	6	5	3
S.D.	14.77	20.12	7.53	11.99
Min.	0	0	0	0
Max.	145	145	36	85

Note: ANOVA test for means difference between three policy areas is  $F = 3.613$  and significant at 5% ( $p\text{-value} = .029$ )

Source: Author, 2008.

Observe further that the network sizes differ significantly across three policy areas, where the networks in environmental management and resource conservation have the largest size of about six partners (median value). This is understandable, since by the nature and scope of the problems the successful implementation of natural resource conservation and environmental policies require very intense collective efforts from all stakeholders (Scheberle 2004).

On the contrary, the size of educational networks is relatively small. Local administrators seem to be less aggressive in forging partnerships when they implement educational or cultural promotion programs. On average, the network size in this policy area consists of approximately three partners. This finding is congruent with that of Table 2 discussed above and needs no further discussion here.

The next question is who are the partners of these collaborations? To answer this, the composition of partners is classified into nine categories. The summary of these partners is delineated in Table 4 below. Here it is evident that locally formed groups are very actively engaged in local administration. About 81 percent of local governments in the study indicate that community groups joined their local networks. Likewise, regional branch offices of central government agencies involved acutely in helping local administrators complete their tasks (about 75 percent of our cases). Local residents in general also participated in community networks, yet to a lesser degree (about 61 percent of local jurisdictions). These three partners were engaged frequently in environmental and natural resource conservation policies as well as public and social welfare programs.

It is somewhat embarrassing that the collaborations between local authorities are limited. Only five percent of local governments worked together in order to accomplish their tasks. This finding raises serious concerns that Thai local governments have not yet

satisfactorily reaped the benefits of service co-production/provisions as suggested by the network literature. Why they barely collaborated with each other is another research question which is beyond this study, yet deserves further investigation. What I may suggest thus far is that central government policies or incentives may be in needed in order to stimulate better collaboration among local agencies<sup>9</sup>.

Note, however, that the above table has not yet provided a clear picture of detailed activities in which the network partners contributed to the networks. This is the topic of subsequent discussions. Table 5 helps extend our investigation. Basically, what the table shows are the characteristics of partners' involvement in collaborative processes: (i) policy or strategic decision-making, (ii) implementation, and (iii) resource exchanges. I classified them based on whether partners involved in decision-making processes acted actively or passively, whether they engaged in implementing the policy/program throughout the entire steps, and what resources (financial, physical, or technical-information) they contributed to the networks.

Table 4: Exhibit of Local Government Partners

Partners	Number (% of total number of LG in the study)	Policy areas			Chi- square	Cramer's V
		Environment and Natural resource conservation	Social and public welfare	Education and Cultural promotion		
National government agencies	35 (16.1)	20 (23.8)	9 (11.4)	6 (10.9)	6.103	.167
Regional office of central government	164 (75.2)	66 (78.6)	61 (77.2)	37 (67.3)	2.54	.108
Local community / Volunteered groups	176 (80.7)	72 (85.7)	66 (83.5)	38 (69.1)	6.534	.173
International development orgs. <sup>a/</sup>	13 (6.0)	12 (14.3)		1 (1.8)		
NGOs or Religious organizations	47 (21.6)	23 (27.4)	9 (11.4)	15 (27.3)	7.574	.186
Local residents	132 (60.6)	66 (78.6)	48 (60.8)	18 (32.7)	29.246	.366
Academic institutes / Professional orgs.	34 (15.6)	16 (19.0)	4 (5.1)	14 (25.5)	11.479	.229
Other local governments <sup>a/</sup>	10 (4.6)	6 (7.1)	3 (3.8)	1 (1.8)		
Local business sectors	46 (21.1)	37 (44.0)	6 (7.6)	3 (5.5)	43.331	.446
Total	218 (100.0)	84 (100.0)	79 (100.0)	55 (100.0)		

Note: <sup>a/</sup> the expected count is less than 5, therefore, no chi-square or Cramer's V is reported. Chi-square and Cramer's V indicate relationships between the involvements of each partner in each policy area. The high relationship indicates that partners are more interested in some policy areas than the others.

Source: Author, 2008.

Table 5 below reveals very intriguing facts. Although regional branch offices of central government agencies are key partners in local networks, they do *reactively* engage in networked activities. Most of the time, they engaged in local collaboration by merely providing technical assistance or consultations, and then step back, despite the fact that they possess very qualified personnel. On the contrary, local community groups are 'true partners' of local networks who often undertake tasks seriously. They engaged in decision-making processes and helped local staff implement the collaborative programs very thoroughly. This finding signifies the importance of future direction of the devolution policy.

In Thailand, there has been a great deal of debate concerning the pros and cons of administrative devolutions and local government autonomy (Bowornwathana 2006; Smoke 2005; Taliercio 2005). As our analysis has shown, it is worth inquiring: Would it be more appropriate if some, if not all, central government staffs who are working in local or regional branch offices were transferred to local authorities? This question concerns the issue of strengthening local government capabilities, reducing administrative redundancy, transaction costs and enhancing local political responsiveness. This challenge clearly deserves future researches regarding whether the

transfer of personnel to local authorities is more beneficial to local governance than the current practice.

Table 5: Frequency of Partners' Involvement in Various Policy Processes

Partners	Processes	Policy/Strategic Decision-making		Implementation		Resource Exchanges		
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>G</i>
National government agencies		9	1		6	24	3	4
Regional office of central government agencies		78	32	48	105	7	28	91
Local community groups/ Volunteered group		46	109	143	29	2	1	10
International development organization		8	2	1	10	8		5
NGOs / Religious organizations		20	10	14	24	5	8	20
Local residents		51	58	43	66	15	1	
Academic institutes / Professional organizations		13	3	10	16	1		29
Other local governments		2	5	3	3	3	2	
Local business sectors		14	5	16	19	11	1	9
<b>Total</b>		<b>218</b>		<b>218</b>		<b>218</b>		

**Notes:**

A = Assisted/consultative in policy decision-making processes

B = Engaged actively in policy/strategy decision-making

C = Engaged thoroughly the entire implementation processes

D = Assisted haphazardly during program implementation

E = Financial resource supports

F = Physical resource supports

G = Technical/expertise/information exchange

Source: Author, 2008.

It should be noted that the classifications of the partners' contributions to networks along with the three policy areas yield somewhat similar results to Table 5 above, except those of the educational and cultural programs which are still in a limited degree of collaborations as already discussed.

## CONCLUSIONS: RESULTS AND NETWORKING

This article provides a systematic analysis to collaborative networking activities in Thai subnational governance. It began by elaborating Thai devolution context for the formation of networks. Then, it analyzes the nature and elements of networked activities which have occurred in Thai local administration. What we can deduce for now is that networked collaboration in Thai subnational government is very hopeful. The devolution programs somehow stimulated local political responsiveness and more collaborative-style local governments.

Networked arrangements are diverse regarding the nature of emerging issues. Generally, local authorities often form the network, with five partners on average, to help accomplish their public purposes. Networked approaches are usually adopted when governmental reaches are limited or when stand-alone actors are incapable of solving problems, as is the case with natural resource preservation, environmental management, and public and social welfare. Collaborations are formed to help enhance policy/program achievement.

By contrast, the analysis shows that in the case of educational and cultural programs in Thai local administration, collaborations are still restricted. In many developed countries, analysts contend that higher educational outcomes can be achieved when local communities get involved in schooling since partnerships help schools gain access to additional resources and information (Bardach 1998; Hannaway 1993; OECD 1989; Meier and O'Toole 2001; Smith and Wohlstetter 2006; UNESCO 2001; Weiler 1993). Therefore, if we believe that collaboration will increase a programs success, it is the future challenge of Thai localities to promote more collaborative approaches in this policy area. Future research on this area may be needed to provide more evidence of the benefits from local educational networks, especially from the developing countries' experiences like Thailand.

Networking approaches are not beyond governmental reaches. This research provides good evidence for many other developing countries and well-developed societies alike in that partnerships are feasible and desirable. This research also shows empirically that local community groups do exist or can be easily formed to support collective governmental works. Somehow, countries with societal and cultural factors like those of Thailand may replicate these administrative trends. What is required is the mobilization of partnerships in which local administrators need to push forward.

In the meantime, the major challenge remains with the collaborations among local authorities. Unlike the experiences of other developed nation, this study reveals the fact that the past collaborations among Thai localities were shortcoming. Thai devolution programs, hence, failed in this point. Still, there are great opportunities for local governments to reap more fruitful benefits from joint service production/ provisions in the future, particularly when the collaborations may efficiently cope with the potential problems of externalities (as in the case of environment and natural resources) or the economy of scale (as the case of public education). Central policies to promote more partnerships among cities through either conditional intergovernmental grants or other means of rewards might be useful. Alternatively, agendas for future research in this

regard may focus on why and when city governments do or do not collaborate with one another.

Considering at a broader perspective toward administrative devolution in Thailand, this initial evaluation reveals the positive results of the devolution on local governance. Local governments are now more accessible and cooperative, signifying that they have become more responsive to external partners. Notwithstanding, the devolution of central personnel to local authorities is on the way. Very few higher-level staff is willing to be transferred to local governments (Green 2005; Smoke 2005). This research shows that the officials in local and regional branches of national government agencies are very capable of helping to solve local problems. Yet, thus far, they have failed to engage themselves intensely in local affairs.

Arguably, they are not local officials and, by administrative designs, need not be accountable to local constituents. Notwithstanding, there is no obvious benefit of having these local and regional branch offices of central agencies. Indeed, this causes administrative redundancies and less responsiveness in a local governance system. The relocations of these regional staffs may more or less improve overall local democratic accountability, which is one of the core element of successive devolution programs (Green 2005).

The devolution policy implemented thus far should lead to the reconsideration of existing Thai public administration design. Many developing countries have pushed forward radical administrative reform (so-called 'Big-Bang' in, for example, Indonesia and the Philippines) while Thailand has followed the path of gradual changes (White and Smoke 2005; Smoke 2005). This research suggests that it is about the time for rethinking the future of devolution programs. Priorities may include the transfer of the groups of central personnel to respective localities. The benefits of doing so, if any, would belong to local communities as a whole.

In sum, this research shows that networked management is on the front line of public administrators and significantly shapes the concept of public administration. Collaborations in Thai cities reflect pleasantly the movement toward more responsive, and perhaps more effective, public administration. This study mirrors the increasing importance of bonding between governments and society and the potential benefit of having a good relationship. Therefore, networked management is the rule of the new administrative game for today's and future's complex public tasks.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The law became effective two years after its enactment (or in 2001).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in fiscal year 2005, in case of municipalities, general-purpose transfers are simply divided into two parts: (i) fifty percent of all transfers will be allocated to all municipalities by the proportion of residential population; (ii) another fifty percent of transfer will be allocated equally to all municipalities. The same is also true for the transfer policies of other fiscal years. Details can be read from the Ordinance of National Decentralization Committee for the Allocation of Intergovernmental Transfer in Fiscal Year 2006, *Royal Gazette*, Vol. 122, Special edition, November 1, 2005, pp 23.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior of Thailand, as of September 30, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> The lower-tier governments, municipality and TAO, function as a single operating unit, which is very close to local residents, providing local public services within their defined territory. While municipalities are located in urbanized areas, TAOs are mostly established in less-developed rural communities. In contrast, PAO is the upper-tier local government which covers an entire province and is responsible for administering local public services at the provincial level as well as for working in development projects that need collaboration among several municipalities or TAOs within the provincial territory. In addition to the three general forms, there are two special units of local governments governing specific areas; namely, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and Pattaya City. More details about institutional arrangement and service responsibilities can be read from, for instance, Krueathep (2004), and Suwanmala (2007).

<sup>5</sup> TAO is the latest institutional development of a multi-level governance system in Thailand. It has been erected by the national parliamentary act in 1994 and has very limited administrative and fiscal capacities, compared with the other forms of local governments. In term of human resources, TAO is allowed by laws to have the number of permanent staff between 3 and 21, depending on the amount of own-source local revenues. Moreover, the average total revenue of TAO is about 3.18% and 20.98%, on average, to those of PAO and municipality, respectively (Ministry of Finance of Thailand, 2004 fiscal year data).

<sup>6</sup> This surely may cause case-selection bias. Readers should be cautious in generalizing the results from this study.

<sup>7</sup> The number does not include students in public schools administered by Ministry of Education and private schools.

<sup>8</sup> In Thailand, the government, either national or local, does not provide a universal health care coverage. In addition, social security fund does not cover those who work in agricultural sectors, unless they voluntarily apply for the fund and pay contributions at predetermined rates.

<sup>9</sup> This finding is surprising in that in Thailand, there is no legal constrain for local governments to collaborate with one another. Still, the Decentralization Plan and Process Act of 1999 substantially provides the legal foundations for local governments to form joint production agreements for provision of public services.

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