

The Role of Local Government in Developing Sustainable Well-being: Community Development Approaches in Thailand

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Received: 05 December 2024; Revised: 10 December 2024; Accepted: 19 December 2024
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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the role of local government in developing sustainable well-being in Thailand under the framework of sustainable development concepts and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study reveals that local government plays five crucial roles: developing sustainable infrastructure, promoting community economy, managing natural resources and environment, strengthening social and cultural capacity, and promoting citizen participation. The article presents an integrated development approach that connects local governance with sustainable development principles, emphasizing the importance of cooperation among government, private sector, and civil society. The findings demonstrate that effective local governance can serve as a vital mechanism for creating long-term citizen well-being through capacity building of local government organizations, improving legal and policy frameworks, and establishing efficient monitoring and evaluation systems. The article provides policy recommendations for enhancing the role of local governments in sustainable governance. The research contributes to understanding how local governance can effectively drive sustainable development goals at the community level, particularly SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities, while addressing unique challenges and opportunities within the Thai context.

Keywords: local governance, well-being, sustainable development, citizen participation, local community

1. Introduction

Local governance in Thailand has undergone continuous reform since the enactment of the Act on Determining Plans and Procedures for Decentralization to Local Administrative Organizations B.E. 2542 (1999), which emphasized the transfer of authority, responsibilities, and budget from the central government to local levels (Office of the Decentralization Committee to Local Administrative Organizations, 2022). This transformation has increased the roles and responsibilities of local administrative organizations in providing public services and developing areas under their jurisdiction. Combined with global societal changes that increasingly emphasize sustainability, local governance must adapt to respond to citizens' needs across multiple dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (Boonchoo & Pinyoanunt, 2023). The concept of well-being has become a crucial goal for governance at all levels, particularly at the local level, which is closest to citizens and can respond to needs directly and rapidly. This study therefore focuses on analyzing the role of local governance in

creating sustainable well-being for citizens.

Sustainable well-being is a concept that integrates human quality of life with environmental conservation and balanced economic development (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). The United Nations has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) covering all dimensions of development, particularly Goal 11 on "Sustainable Cities and Communities," which emphasizes creating human settlements that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (United Nations, 2015). In the Thai context, local governance is therefore crucial for driving these goals into reality at the area level. Past research has found that effective local governance can serve as an important mechanism for reducing inequality, creating economic opportunities, and conserving natural resources effectively (Charoensin-o-larn, 2021).

Currently, Thailand has 7,852 local administrative organizations, comprising Provincial Administrative Organizations, municipalities, Sub-district Administrative Organizations, and Pattaya City (Department of Local Administration, 2024). Each organization varies in size and capacity, resulting in diverse capabilities in service provision and area development. The key challenge today is elevating the capacity of local administrative organizations to perform their duties effectively and create positive impacts on citizens' sustainable well-being. This study seeks to analyze best practices and policy recommendations suitable for the Thai context to promote local governance as a vital mechanism for driving sustainable development.

2. Concepts and Theories of Local Governance for Sustainability

2.1 Concepts of Local Governance and Decentralization

Local governance is a governing system that empowers communities to manage public affairs at the area level, with key principles including decentralization, citizen participation, and proximity to citizens (Shah, 2006). This concept is rooted in democratic governance theory, which believes that allowing citizens to participate in decision-making leads to development that best responds to local people's needs. In the Thai context, decentralization to local levels has been seriously promoted since the 1990s through several important laws, such as the Tambon Council and Sub-district Administrative Organization Act B.E. 2537 (1994) and the Municipality Act B.E. 2496 (1953), which have been amended multiple times (Nitirat Sithikjon, 2020). Such decentralization aims to increase public service efficiency, reduce decision-making delays, and create local accountability to area residents.

Local governance in the current era faces new and increasingly complex challenges, including climate change, natural resource scarcity, population migration, and economic structural changes (OECD, 2019). These issues require integrated solutions covering multiple dimensions and considering long-term sustainability. The concept of integrated governance has therefore gained increasing attention. This concept emphasizes inter-agency collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and comprehensive perspectives on area problems and opportunities (Peters, 2018). Applying this concept to local governance is essential for effectively managing modern complex problems, coupled with digital technology changes that open opportunities for local governance to use new tools in service provision and citizen participation.

2.2 Meaning and Dimensions of Sustainable Well-being

Well-being is a concept that has been continuously developed and expanded, starting from physical and mental health perspectives and extending to social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Diener & Seligman, 2004). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has established the Better Life Index framework

comprising 11 dimensions: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance (OECD, 2020). This framework has been accepted and applied in many countries, including Thailand, for measuring and evaluating citizens' quality of life. Sustainable well-being extends this concept to cover the time dimension, emphasizing that current well-being must not compromise future generations' ability to achieve well-being (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

In the context of local governance, sustainable well-being can be divided into five main dimensions: (1) Economic dimension, covering employment, adequate income, and financial security; (2) Social dimension, covering access to public services, social equality, and participation in community activities; (3) Environmental dimension, covering air and water quality, waste management, and natural resource conservation; (4) Health dimension, covering access to healthcare services, disease prevention, and health promotion; and (5) Cultural dimension, covering cultural preservation and transmission, arts promotion, and local identity creation (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Development that covers all dimensions and creates interconnections among them is therefore key to creating sustainable well-being. Well-being assessment must use diverse indicators that reflect the complexity of citizens' real lives.

3. The Role of Local Administrative Organizations in Sustainable Development

3.1 Developing Sustainable Infrastructure

Local administrative organizations play a crucial role in developing infrastructure that supports sustainable well-being. This infrastructure includes not only transportation, utilities, and various facilities but must also consider environmental impacts and long-term sustainability (Newman et al., 2019). Sustainable infrastructure development must emphasize environmentally friendly design principles, use of recyclable materials, energy conservation, and greenhouse gas reduction. Examples include developing efficient public transportation systems, creating bicycle paths, establishing wastewater treatment systems using clean technology, and installing renewable energy systems such as solar panels in public buildings. Investment in such infrastructure requires long-term planning and adequate budget allocation, which is often a significant challenge for local administrative organizations with financial constraints.

Furthermore, infrastructure development must consider the different needs of various population groups, such as children, elderly, and disabled persons, to achieve equality in service access through universal design. Designing public spaces to be friendly to all genders and ages, creating public parks and green spaces to promote public health and well-being, and developing digital systems to increase access to public services are all important parts of sustainable infrastructure development. Citizen participation in planning and design processes is also a crucial factor that makes infrastructure responsive to actual community needs and sustainably maintained. Creating understanding and ownership feelings in development projects helps maximize government investment benefits and sustainability.

3.2 Promoting Community Economy and Employment

Promoting community economy is another important role of local administrative organizations in creating sustainable well-being. A strong community economy creates jobs, generates income, and reduces social inequality (Porter & Kramer, 2019). Local administrative organizations can promote community economy through various channels, such as supporting community enterprises, developing local products, organizing community markets, promoting eco-tourism, and developing vocational skills for citizens. These activities must adhere to

circular economy principles that emphasize efficient resource use, waste reduction, and value creation from local products. Examples include processing agricultural products for higher value, converting waste materials into new products, or developing food from local ingredients.

Promoting sufficiency economy is also an important approach consistent with His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2021). Applying sufficiency economy principles at the community level helps create economic security, reduce external dependency, and strengthen community immunity against economic fluctuations. Local administrative organizations can support household food production, group savings, community fund establishment, and occupation development based on local wisdom.

Creating quality and sustainable employment is a crucial factor in developing well-being. Local administrative organizations can create employment opportunities through local development projects, procurement that promotes local entrepreneurs, and workforce skill development aligned with market demands. Using digital technology to connect buyers and sellers, creating online platforms for local products, and developing digital tourism are all important tools for driving community economy in the digital age. Investment in digital infrastructure development and digital literacy for citizens helps increase competitiveness and create new opportunities for communities.

4. Managing Natural Resources and Environment for Sustainability

4.1 Conservation and Restoration of Natural Resources

Sustainable natural resource management is an important responsibility of local administrative organizations that directly affects citizens' well-being both currently and in the future. Natural resources such as forests, water sources, soil, and biodiversity are crucial foundations of ecosystems and local economies (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Local administrative organizations have roles in establishing policies and measures for conservation, restoration, and sustainable utilization of natural resources. This operation requires cooperation from all sectors: government, private sector, and civil society in creating understanding and compliance with sustainable natural resource management principles. Using legal tools such as local ordinances to establish rules for natural resource utilization, creating economic incentives for conservation, and developing monitoring systems.

Water management is a particularly important issue in the context of climate change that causes water scarcity and flooding problems. Local administrative organizations must develop integrated water management systems covering water source conservation, rainwater collection, wastewater treatment, and efficient water use (World Water Council, 2018). Creating community-level water security helps reduce risks from drought and flooding while supporting economic activities and citizens' livelihoods. Using appropriate technology and creating community knowledge in water management helps increase efficiency and sustainability of water management systems. Creating cooperation networks among local administrative organizations for water resource management in the same watershed is also an important approach for increasing efficiency and reducing management costs.

4.2 Waste and Pollution Management

Waste and pollution management is a significant challenge for local governance in the current era, especially in areas with rapid economic and population growth. Effective waste management not only helps maintain clean and safe environments but can also create added value and economic opportunities (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019). The 3R principles (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) are basic conceptual frameworks that local administrative

organizations should promote, emphasizing waste reduction at source, reuse, and recycling. This operation requires creating correct knowledge and behaviors for citizens, organizing efficient waste separation systems, and developing infrastructure for managing each type of waste. Promoting circular economy at the community level through waste processing into valuable products, such as making compost from organic waste and recycling plastic into new products.

Controlling air, noise, and water pollution is an important responsibility requiring serious law enforcement and cooperation from all sectors. Regular environmental quality monitoring and inspection, establishing appropriate standards for local contexts, and creating citizen participation mechanisms in environmental surveillance. Using green technology and promoting renewable energy use helps reduce pollution emissions and create better environments. Developing alert systems and emergency pollution response is also important for protecting citizens' health and safety. Creating consistency and commitment among local administrative organizations in environmental management helps generate confidence and cooperation from citizens and the private sector.

5. Strengthening Social and Cultural Capacity

5.1 Promoting Education and Lifelong Learning

Education is a crucial foundation for developing sustainable well-being as it is a tool for enhancing human potential, creating economic opportunities, and promoting social participation (UNESCO, 2020). Local administrative organizations have important roles in managing basic education, promoting non-formal and informal education, and creating learning societies. Developing education quality at the local level must emphasize connecting knowledge with community contexts and needs, promoting problem-based learning, developing 21st-century skills, and creating knowledge-to-practice connections. Using digital technology in education helps increase knowledge access and create diverse learning opportunities, especially in remote areas or disadvantaged groups. Developing community libraries, learning centers, and public spaces that promote learning helps create environments conducive to knowledge and skill development for citizens of all ages.

Education for sustainability is an educational approach that emphasizes creating knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for building a sustainable future. Integrating content about environment, society, and economy into educational curricula helps learners understand interconnections among various problems and think of sustainable solutions (Sterling, 2011). Promoting learning from local wisdom, transmitting traditional knowledge and skills, and combining modern knowledge with local knowledge helps create identity and community pride. Organizing learning activities connected to local problems and opportunities, such as studying local ecosystems, analyzing environmental problems, and developing community projects, helps make education meaningful and beneficial for local development.

5.1 Health Care and Social Welfare

Providing comprehensive and quality health and social welfare services is a crucial factor in creating well-being. Local administrative organizations have roles in health promotion, disease prevention, and caring for vulnerable groups such as children, elderly, disabled, and low-income people (World Health Organization, 2020). Developing strong primary healthcare systems helps citizens access basic healthcare services comprehensively and with quality. Promoting holistic health covering physical, mental, social, and intellectual health, creating health-conducive environments such as providing exercise areas, promoting safe food consumption, and reducing health risk factors. Using digital technology in healthcare

services, such as health warning systems, remote health monitoring, and providing health knowledge through online platforms.

Developing sustainable social welfare systems must emphasize creating security and reducing inequality. Providing community-based elderly care, creating social participation opportunities for disabled persons, promoting early childhood development, and supporting families with problems. Developing social networks and creating connections among community members helps strengthen social capital, which is a crucial factor in creating community resilience and adaptability (Putnam, 2000). Promoting social and cultural activities that create good relationships among community members, organizing local traditions and festivals, and creating public spaces conducive to social interaction helps create bonds and happiness in living together.

6. Promoting Citizen Participation and Good Governance

6.1 Developing Citizen Participation Systems

Citizen participation is the heart of effective and sustainable local governance. Creating mechanisms that allow citizens to express opinions, participate in decision-making, and monitor local government operations helps increase transparency, accountability, and fairness (Arnstein, 1969). Developing participation systems must cover all stages of the policy process, from problem identification, planning, implementation, to evaluation. Using digital technology to promote participation, such as online platforms for gathering opinions, electronic voting systems, and applications for reporting community problems, helps increase access and convenience in participation, especially for young people and those with travel limitations to attend meetings.

Creating knowledge and participation skills for citizens is necessary because effective participation requires understanding of government processes, knowledge about citizens' rights and duties, and communication and negotiation skills. Organizing citizen education programs, training community leaders, and creating civil society organization networks helps strengthen citizens' participation capacity (Gaventa, 2006). Recognizing the right to access information and creating transparent and easily accessible information systems helps citizens effectively monitor and inspect local government operations. Preparing easily understandable operational reports and using appropriate language for different target groups helps increase citizen understanding and participation.

6.2 Creating Good Governance and Transparency

Good governance is a management approach emphasizing transparency, accountability, fairness, participation, and efficiency. Practicing good governance principles helps create citizen confidence in local government and increases operational efficiency (UNDP, 1997). Developing transparent management systems must start from creating clear rules and work procedures, disclosing operational information and budget expenditures, and creating effective checking and balancing mechanisms. Using technology to increase transparency, such as electronic procurement systems, real-time budget tracking systems, and online operational reporting systems, helps reduce corruption opportunities and increase credibility.

Developing personnel capacity in local administrative organizations is a crucial factor in creating good governance. Training on ethics, corruption prevention, and citizen service, creating fair and transparent performance evaluation systems, and providing appropriate rewards and punishments helps create incentives for personnel to work according to good governance principles. Creating organizational culture emphasizing citizen service, teamwork, and continuous improvement helps increase operational efficiency and effectiveness (Osborne

& Gaebler, 1992). Creating cooperation networks with external organizations such as educational institutions, non-governmental development organizations, and international organizations helps increase knowledge and experience in developing good governance and exchanging best practices.

7. Development Approaches and Policy Recommendations

7.1 Approaches for Developing Local Administrative Organization Capacity

Developing the capacity of local administrative organizations is key to creating sustainable well-being. Such development must cover dimensions of personnel, organization, technology, and finance. Personnel development must emphasize creating knowledge and skills consistent with modern challenges, such as big data management, digital technology use, evidence-based policy analysis, and citizen communication (Evans & Campos, 2013). Preparing long-term personnel development plans connected to local development strategies, creating organizational learning and knowledge sharing systems, and creating self-development incentives for personnel. Developing digital management systems helps increase efficiency and reduce operational costs. Using management information systems, developing citizen and area databases, and creating data-driven decision-making systems helps make local governance more accurate and responsive to citizen needs.

Developing cooperation networks among local administrative organizations is an important approach for increasing efficiency and reducing costs. Joint procurement, resource and expertise sharing, and joint project development helps small local administrative organizations access quality services and technology (Hulst & Montfort, 2007). Creating centers of excellence in various areas, such as environmental management, community economic development, or digital technology use, and providing consultation and knowledge transfer services to other organizations helps elevate the overall capacity of the local governance system. Developing efficient monitoring and evaluation systems helps organizations improve operations and demonstrate performance to citizens clearly.

7.2 Policy Recommendations for Creating Sustainable Well-being

Creating sustainable well-being at the local level requires policy support from central government and improvement of related legal frameworks. Amending the Decentralization to Local Administrative Organizations Act to clarify responsibility and budget transfer, developing budget allocation mechanisms appropriate to local administrative organization size and capacity, and creating incentives for efficient and transparent operations. Establishing local development funds supporting projects impacting sustainable well-being, developing performance evaluation systems covering all sustainability dimensions, and creating learning and experience exchange mechanisms among local administrative organizations (Rhodes, 1997).

Promoting research and development for local work is necessary for creating innovation and new approaches to problem-solving and area development. Creating cooperation among educational institutions, research organizations, and local administrative organizations in developing knowledge and technology appropriate to local contexts. Supporting action research with community participation that directly impacts area development, developing technology and innovation transfer systems from educational institutions to field practice, and creating learning networks among researchers, practitioners, and communities helps increase efficiency in applying knowledge to sustainable well-being development.

Models for Developing Sustainable Well-being at Local Level

Table 1: Integrated Model for Developing Sustainable Well-being at Local Level

| Development Dimension | Main Role of Local Administrative Organizations | Success Indicators | Implementation Mechanisms |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Economic Dimension | Promote community economy, create jobs, develop local products | Employment rate, average household income, number of community enterprises | Community economic development fund, local markets, vocational training |
| Social Dimension | Provide public services, promote education, care for vulnerable groups | Service access level, citizen satisfaction, happiness index | Community service center, quality schools, welfare programs |
| Environmental Dimension | Manage waste, conserve natural resources, control pollution | Air and water quality, recycling rate, forest area | Comprehensive waste management system, forest conservation projects, pollution control measures |
| Health Dimension | Promote health, prevent disease, provide primary healthcare | Disease incidence rate, average life expectancy, healthcare coverage | Sub-district health promoting hospitals, health promotion activities, public health volunteers |
| Cultural Dimension | Preserve culture, promote arts, create local identity | Number of cultural activities, participation level, local pride | Cultural festivals, cultural learning centers, arts conservation groups |

Source: Adapted from OECD Better Life Index (2020), United Nations SDGs Framework (2015), and Thai Local Development Best Practices

Table 2: Citizen Participation Mechanisms in Sustainable Well-being Development

| Participation Level | Implementation Method | Tools/Channels | Expected Outcomes |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Information Provision | Disseminate policy and project information | Website, social media, newsletters | Citizens receive information |
| Consultation | Gather opinions and suggestions | Public meetings, opinion surveys | Receive citizen feedback |
| Participatory Decision-making | Joint policy formulation and priority setting | Community committees, voting | Policies reflect citizen needs |
| Joint Implementation | Share resources and labor in projects | Volunteers, voluntary groups, community partnerships | Projects are sustainable and maintained |
| Control and Monitoring | Inspect and evaluate operations | Monitoring committees, | Operations are transparent and |

complaint systems efficient

Source: Based on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) and adapted for Thai local governance context

8. Conclusion

Local governance plays important and diverse roles in developing sustainable well-being, covering five main dimensions: developing sustainable infrastructure, promoting community economy, managing natural resources and environment, strengthening social and cultural capacity, and promoting citizen participation. Operations in each dimension must be interconnected and integrated to create positive impacts on citizens' well-being truly. The success of local governance for sustainability depends on several factors, including organizational capacity, policy support from central government, citizen participation, and cooperation among different sectors. Developing the capacity of local administrative organizations in personnel, technology, and management is therefore essential.

This study points out that effective development approaches must emphasize creating citizen understanding and participation at every stage, using empirical data and evidence in decision-making, and creating continuous learning and improvement mechanisms. Important policy recommendations include improving legal frameworks to increase clarity in decentralization, developing appropriate budget allocation systems, promoting research and development for local work, and creating learning networks and experience exchange among local administrative organizations. Implementing these recommendations will help local governance serve as a vital mechanism for driving sustainable development and creating long-term well-being for Thai citizens.

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