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THE SPIRIT OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM: PUBLIC WELFARE OPERATIONS OF RESCUE GROUPS SUPPORTED BY BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS IN THE NORTHERN REGION OF THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the dangers of people's social lives in a context where Buddhist institutions drive themselves toward becoming socially engaged in Buddhism, this research draws on a purposive sampling of 30 key informants—Buddhist monks and volunteer rescue team members in northern Thailand—who are directly involved in rescue operations. Thematic analysis (TA) was then applied to identify core themes. Employing qualitative research methods, the study aims to gain a deep understanding of rescue groups' public welfare operations, focusing on two important aspects. First, it investigates the operating model of the public welfare operations of the rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions. And secondly, it analyzes the roles of the public welfare operations of the rescue groups. This article collates sociological perspectives of this effort with Buddhist concepts. The research findings indicate that assisting, supporting, and integrating public welfare operations are at the heart of the operating model of rescue groups that are supported by Buddhist institutions. Assisting refers to direct aid by Buddhist institutions without intermediaries; supporting involves mobilizing resources to enable others to assist; and integrating positions the institution as a social network node, coordinating multi-sectoral participation. Its implications are apparent in three key roles: as initiators in problem-solving, as centers for coordinating cooperation, and as facilitators in strengthening the Buddhist institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand has long been shaped by its deep-rooted connection to Buddhism, which has played a central role in its social and political life for centuries. Institutionalized during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) as part of efforts to build a modern secular nation-state, the Sangha was historically positioned as both a moral authority and an agent of national unity (Larsson, 2020). In contemporary Thai society, however, the Sangha finds itself navigating a new moral landscape shaped by rapid social change, growing economic precarity, the pressures of capitalism, the rise of secular values, and the impact of COVID-19. In this shifting context, monastics are no longer confined to temple rituals or doctrinal instruction; they increasingly take on roles in social welfare, public service, and community resilience.

“Rescue” is a collective practice in a society where people come together through mutual assistance intertwining a risky society and social assistance under the knowledge of emergency medicine. This research examines how monks and lay volunteers collaboratively reconfigure religious practice through their engagement in rescue work, revealing the evolving nature of Buddhist ethics and institutions in contemporary Thai society. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), both Buddhist institutions and rescue groups have been working by integrating the cultural capital of both Buddhist institutions and rescue groups, especially in emergency medical knowledge that leads to a comprehensive community support during societal crises. With reference to this, questions have been raised about how Buddhist institutions have played a role in operations of the rescue groups, what forms this influence takes, and how Buddhist institutions can further develop their roles in supporting rescue operations.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the role of Buddhist institutions in Thailand has undergone significant transformation. This period of crisis catalyzed a shift in the monastic mission toward greater social engagement, particularly in providing assistance to those experiencing hardship. Central to this transformation are monks who possess charismatic authority and embody characteristics of wise leader Buddhism, integrating spiritual leadership, faith-based influence, and religious principles into actions aimed at improving community well-being (Jearajit, 2022). Rescue operations supported by Buddhist institutions have mirrored this orientation, especially in Northern Thailand, where monks are deeply trusted by local communities. This trust has shaped a prevailing perception that, in times of uncertainty, *“if you can’t think of a solution, turn to the monks.”* During the COVID-19 crisis, when access to medical and public health services was severely limited, rescue groups played a vital role in bridging the gap between formal healthcare systems and the immediate health needs of the community (Panyachit and Wanitchanon, 2022).

This analysis focuses on three selected areas, namely 1) Sang Kaew Bodhiyan Rescue Group, Wat Sang Kaew Bodhiyan, Mae Suai district, Chiang Rai province, 2) Pho Nguyen Rescue Group, Doi Saket district, Chiang Mai province, and 3) Lampang Point Sop Prap Rescue association, Sop Prap district, Lampang province. We selected the three research sites from purposive selections under the selection of rescue groups that have been operating in tandem with the Buddhist Institute continuously for more than a year and are currently conducting public welfare activities with the Sangha. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of Buddhist institutions in supporting rescue group operations should proceed with the idea of Socially Engaged Buddhism.

Socially Engaged Buddhism represents a paradigm shift that transforms the role of Buddhist institutions from traditional, inward-focused roles to practical engagement with society, aligning Buddhist teachings with social change (Queen, 2000; King, 2009; Loy and Rothberg, 2014; Main and Lai, 2013). In Thai society, this transformation has been facilitated by the Sangha Supreme Council's public welfare committee, which links Buddhist institutions to community welfare management. Over time, these institutions have evolved from assisting people in disaster situations to becoming a supportive role for the community, for example, by playing a developmental role in leveraging the cultural and social capitals of Buddhist institutions in creating a well-lived community. Recently, these institutions have embraced an integrative role, with temples serving as centers that connect efforts to address societal issues in collaboration with government agencies, private sector organizations, and civil societies. This collaborative approach aims to improve community well-being and provide aid during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The endeavors of these Buddhist institutions have been shown to be clear, effective, and are of great help in supporting and promoting the work of the government sector (Sirisawad, 2021 [2564 BE]; Jearajit 2022, [2565 BE])

In addition, Western scholars have shown increasing interest in reshaping the roles of Buddhist institutions in contemporary Thai society. Keyes (1971), a prominent anthropologist who played a large role in the field of Thai studies, highlighted the relationship between national-level issues and the role of Buddhism in society, especially concerning the restructuring of Buddhist institution administration according to the Sangha Act. This transformation influenced Buddhist institutions to become part of the state's support machineries, aligning with government policies, such as supporting Buddhist Dharma ambassadors and propagators. This transformation intertwines the roles of Buddhist institutions with the structures of state power, raising questions about how Buddhist institutions maintain their positions and influence in public spaces.

The Buddhist institution in Northern Thailand exhibits distinct characteristics compared to other regions, reflecting a unique integration of local cultural identity and the everyday social life of local communities. Central to this institution is the figure of the *khru*ba, a charismatic spiritual leader who commands deep respect and reverence. As a result, Buddhist monks in the North often play a significant role in the daily lives of people, not only through the performance of religious rites but also as a source of moral and practical support. This strong foundation of faith contributes to the sustained presence and stability of Buddhism in the region (Darlington, 2003; Keyes, 1971; Scupin, 1986). In this study, the selected rescue groups served as a lens through which the distinctiveness of Northern Thai Buddhism could be observed. Specifically, the Saengkaew Bodhiyan Rescue Group, operating under the patronage of *Khru*ba Ariyachat Ariyajitto, exemplifies this close relationship. Meanwhile, groups such as the Pho Nguyen Rescue Group and the Lampang Point Sop Prap Rescue Association demonstrate how Buddhist values and spiritual presence permeate local communities and integrate into daily practices under the leadership of visionary abbots.

These changes also align with the global trend of secularization of certain roles of religious institutions, prompting questions about the roles of Buddhist institutions in contemporary society. Therefore, this research seeks to understand how Buddhist institutions adapt to societal changes and their contributions

to the well-being of people. It also surveys their involvement in social support activities, known as “public welfare,” by the Thai Buddhist Institute, as to how these activities align with the broader mission of the Sangha in promoting the welfare and development of society.

BUDDHISM FOR SOCIETY ON THE BORDER: ENGAGING WITH SOCIETY

In the context of intense global economic development leading to widespread social inequality, the practice of Buddhism has taken on a significant role that is beyond its spiritual dimension. Its role has expanded to encompass various forms of social welfare and cooperation, reflecting the diversity of religious interactions in providing aid and support (Phra Paisan Visaro, 2009 [2552 BE]). Talcott Parsons (1967) once suggested two dimensions to consider regarding religion in modern society: the secularization dimension, which reflects religion’s distancing from involvement with the state, and the dimension of religion as social integration, suggesting that religion is a moral community, emphasizing that religious conversion does not result from individual worship but from alignment with societal values that correspond to people’s way of life.

Amid the transformation and adaptation of religious institutions, Buddhist institutions have moved into the paradigm of Buddhism for society by linking knowledge with action. Buddhism for Society has emerged as a paradigm that blends knowledge with action to address contemporary societal challenges, social problems, and social injustices by applying Buddhist principles to create a way to solve these problems. It entails applying Buddhist principles to solve social issues through community-based activities (Queen, 2000) and involves Buddhism in social engagement to alleviate human suffering (King, 2009).

Furthermore, Socially Engaged Buddhism is also a form of Dharma practice stemming from the profound and intricate interdependence of all sentient beings. It is an enactment of a Bodhisattva vow to alleviate suffering through the understanding of one’s own suffering and that of others. Emancipation from suffering is inseparable from interdependence and mutual reliance among sentient beings (Loy and Rothberg, 2014). Socially Engaged Buddhism thus represents an endeavor to redefine the role of religion in the contemporary world, characterized by the complex interplay of society and culture. This is achieved through a process that involves the separation of the state from religion, rejection of traditional religious practices, and a reformation of the religion itself (Main and Lai, 2013).

Socially engaged Buddhism in Thai Society follows the operational guidelines of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand’s Public Welfare Division known as “Buddhist Way of Public Welfare,” which emphasizes the Buddhist doctrine of “*Wander forth, O Bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans*” (*caratha bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujaṇa-hitāya bahujaṇa-sukhāya, lokānukampāya, atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ*) (Vin I 21; S I 105; Bodhi transl. 2000: 198). This approach recognizes that religious institutions are closely connected to their communities and focuses on addressing social suffering at the grassroots level. In addition, it encompasses various moral codes and practices related to social welfare, such as resolution (*Chanda*), right thought (*Sammā-saṅkappa*), the four sublime states of mind (*Brahmavihāra*), the four principles of service (*Saṅgahavatthu*), the six states of conciliation

(*Sārāṇīya-dhamma*), the seven conditions of welfare (*Aparihāṇiya-dhamma*), the seven qualities of a good friend (*Kalyāṇamitta-dhamma*), and the seven qualities of a good man (*Sappurisa-dhamma*).

However, we also consider socially engaged Buddhism in the light of spiritual capital. Studies on spiritual capital have been presented from various perspectives. Spiritual capital is linked to other forms of capital such as social and cultural capital. Spiritual capital illustrates how religion within institutions affects individual actions, values, and behaviors (Finke and Dugherty, 2002; Gemar, 2023; Verter, 2003). The linkage between spiritual capital and social capital is illustrated through monks' engagement in public welfare practices, particularly their involvement in rescue operations, which is the-focus of this article. Verter's (2003) notion of spiritual capital refers to individual action from religious practice for linking social structure, the form of spiritual capital, and the form of cultural capital of Bourdieu—embodied state, objectified state, and institutionalized state. We focus on embodied states that are "*knowledge, abilities, tastes, and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion*" (Verter, 2003, p.159). Spiritual capital is embodied in an individual's consciousness and appears in the form of religious habits. In this research, the form of embodied state of spiritual capital reflects-the action between Buddhist institutions and social networks by engaging society under the premise of the Tripitaka (Buddhist canonical scriptures).

METHODOLOGY

In studying the public welfare operations of rescue groups, the researchers considered the fluidity and urgency of real-world rescue operations. In this research process, a qualitative methodology was employed to provide insights into unfolding events and expand the boundaries of understanding within rescue groups affiliated with Buddhist institutions. This approach considered the relationships that emerge within the framework of interpretivism from data collection to data presentation. Researchers were mindful of the ethical aspects of interviewing and maintaining the confidentiality of interviewees to prevent any negative repercussions on the study participants, encompassing their physical, mental, and social well-being.

The research was conducted in three selected locations: 1) Sang Kaew Bodhiyan Rescue Group, Wat Sang Kaew Bodhiyan, Mae Suai district, Chiang Rai province, 2) Pho Nguyen Rescue Group, Doi Saket district, Chiang Mai province, and 3) Lampang Point Sop Prap Rescue association, Sop Prap district, Lampang province. These rescue groups were supported by Buddhist institutions. The selection was based on their continuous operations for over a year, as well as their role as outcomes of the Buddhist institution's adaptation efforts toward sustainable social development under the public assistance of The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand.

Researchers conducted fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, granting key informants the opportunity to actively contribute information. Simultaneously, researchers employed a preliminary set of questions to shape the research inquiry. In addition, to ensure the credibility of the research data, the researchers utilized a go-along interview technique that emphasized contextually based information. This approach delved into the experiences and meanings attributed to rescue operations and the impacts arising from these experiences. The go-along interview technique also relied on the development of rapport between researchers and key informants to build trust swiftly (Carpiano, 2009).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face in Thai, with each session lasting approximately 40–50 minutes. The questions focused on their experiences in rescue operations, the differences between general rescue and rescue supported by Buddhist institutions, and the Buddhist principles that contributed to the success of their rescue efforts.

The selection of key informants through purposive sampling included Buddhist monks involved in public welfare operations, monks playing a role in rescue group operations, rescue personnel, and individuals who had received assistance or experienced disaster situations. The inclusion criteria for Buddhist monks and rescue volunteers were as follows: (1) having at least three years of experience in rescue operations, and (2) having received training in basic first aid or holding certification related to emergency medical operations.

Regarding data analysis, we combined an inductive and deductive approach to data analysis, thematic analysis (TA). For the deductive approach, we are considering a theoretical-based, socially engaged Buddhism and Buddhist concepts found in the Tripitaka (Buddhist canonical scriptures) to categorize research findings. Deductive approach conducting code to research findings: The operating model of public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions and the role of public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions. After the deductive approach, we used the inductive approach, blending data from semi-structured interviews and the go-along interview technique to “explore new terrain” with codes from the deductive approach (Clarke and Braun, 2016) to present key findings in public welfare operations of rescue groups in the northern region of Thailand.

RESULTS

The active role of Buddhist institutions within Thai society, particularly their engagement through various public welfare initiatives, plays a significant role in shaping the collaborative rescue groups supported by these institutions. Nonetheless, such social endeavors are deeply entangled with diverse structural societal conditions, underscoring the idea that Buddhist institutions are inextricably linked to the broader community. Furthermore, the restoration of Buddhism as a focal point of faith within Thai society remains a pivotal goal for ensuring the sustainability of the institution. In this context, the researchers draw on empirical data from fieldwork to articulate how Buddhism contributes to a society that is vulnerable to disasters, emphasizing the public welfare operations of specific rescue groups.

Amidst Emergency: The Operating Model of Public Welfare Operations of Rescue Groups Supported by Buddhist Institutions

There are three forms of public welfare operations within these rescue groups, they are to assist, support, and integrate public welfare operations.

In its first model, public welfare activity is a form of action initiated by monks in Buddhist institutions, driven by their inherent sense of societal compassion and the desire to help the community. Coordinated with voluntary efforts, these activities are easily and swiftly executed. Rescue groups underpinned by Buddhist institutions operate through direct, unconditional assistance from monks, temples,

or monastic organizations. This direct aid, whether in response to roadside accidents or providing essential items for health and recovery after crises, is given without any expectation of something in return. Such charitable efforts, devoid of commercial interests, leverage donations and resources from temples or monks at the helm of Buddhist establishments to propel rescue group activities.

Furthermore, the monks' assistance extends through a social network known as "merit-making" and engagement with "devoted followers." This network thrives on donations of essentials to the temples, which are subsequently utilized for rescue missions. The provision of these necessary items significantly safeguards the community, as evidenced by the testimony of a senior monk involved with the Pho Ngern Rescue Group, at the Mae Hoy Ngern temple, Chiang Mai province:

We have a vehicle equipped with searchlights. [More] importantly, it is fitted with cutters and lights, so in case of an accident, we can immediately respond with this vehicle. Even if we run out of fuel, we [will] refill and continue to help. Importantly, the thing is that the villagers were very reassured, and we also established a training center. The younger generations can receive direct training. [This] provides peace of mind to village elders who are actively involved in the rescue efforts.

The discussion above underscores the concept of "Charismatic Authority" among monks, as theorized by Max Weber. This concept reflects the monks' capability to unify followers spiritually and instill confidence in the personal endeavors of their communities. It also encompasses the ability to command trust from broader social networks, moving beyond rigid traditions and regulatory constraints (Dow, 1978). Meanwhile, Paul Cohen's perspective suggests that building a reservoir of "meritorious charisma" is key to becoming a spiritual anchor for believers. This approach is anchored in a flexible interpretation of Buddhist teachings on "Holy men," as exemplified by esteemed spiritual teachers Kruba Boonchum. This relationship between accumulating 'Great merit' and achieving 'Perfection' plays a crucial role in establishing leadership within social and political spheres (Jirattikorn, 2016). In the context of the Suttantapitaka, there is an emphasis on the emergence of spiritual centrality and leadership roles of monks, cultivated through what is known as the four means of sustaining a favorable relationship (*Saṅgahavatthu*). These principles are foundational for group cohesion and leadership, comprising: 1. *Dāna* (the act of giving or charity), 2. *Peyyavajja* (endearing or persuasive speech), 3. *Atthacariyā* (beneficial conduct or service to others), and 4. *Samānattatā* (impartiality or consistent fairness) (D III 152, 232; A II 32, 248; A IV 219, 364; Bodhi transl. 2012: 419).

The second model involves supportive public-welfare operations. This model demonstrates Buddhist institutions' outstanding collaboration with relevant government and private sectors in rescue activities carried out in a balanced way, thus ensuring a fair approach to rescue activities. In local rescue missions, a system is in place involving the reception and transfer of disaster victims between non-profit organizations and state health organizations within the emergency medical services. Consequently, rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions should also endeavor to integrate seamlessly within existing operations. This scenario can be demonstrated by utilizing temple resources in several ways: conducting personnel development and training sessions, providing rescue and relief equipment, and financially supporting public health staff in emergency medical services during various phases. Such an application of resources from Buddhist institutions is seen as generating social and cultural capital that significantly

enhances the effectiveness of rescue operations. These supportive public welfare operations become apparent in three essential dimensions:

The first dimension, “Support of equipment and physical terms,” involves the monks’ generosity in offering temple premises for activities of rescue groups, including storage facilities for crucial operational tools and the supply of donated equipment from devoted individuals for productive use. This practice reflects the essence of a saying in Pāli: “*householders and homeless alike, each a support for the other (Sāgārā anāgārā ca ubho aññoññanissitā)*” (It 107, Ireland transl. 1997: 187). The interdependence between monks and community members highlights the critical role of the monks in leveraging temple spaces for the community’s own well-being, of supportive public welfare operations.

The second dimension, “Human Resource Development,” focuses on cultivating rescue networks, particularly among youths in the local community. These individuals are not only involved in rescue operations but are also on the path to becoming professional volunteer rescuers. Buddhist institutions recognize the importance of these groups, particularly proactive, and civic-minded youths with a desire to contribute to society. These young people embody what’s known as a “Volunteer Habitus,” a trait they develop through hands-on volunteering experiences or influences from their family, educational background, and Buddhist teachings. This habitus, a concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, is an intrinsic mindset that often manifests unknowingly in one’s actions (Swartz, 1997). In Buddhist terms, such individuals are seen as possessing the four sublime states of mind or “*Brahmavihāra*,” which include loving-kindness (*Mettā*), compassion (*Karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*Muditā*), and equanimity (*Upekkhā*) (D III 220; Vism 111, 320). They are also recognized for exhibiting the seven qualities of a good friend (*Kalyāṇamitta*): they are pleasant and agreeable, respected, esteemed, skilled in speech, patiently endure being spoken to, give deep talks, and they do not enjoin one to do what is wrong (A IV 32, Bodhi transl. 2012: 1022). As stated by a Sop Prap rescue youth volunteer:

I followed the monks in their work because I wanted to contribute to society. I’ve always been involved in volunteer work since my school days. Using my free time for a good cause feels far more rewarding than just driving around aimlessly, as the monks would say. It’s about spending time in a way that benefits others...

The third dimension, “Public Health Support,” involves the expansion of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions going beyond just life-saving activities. This broader perspective considers the immediate hardships faced by community members, especially in health-related matters. For example, it encompasses assistance for those requiring hospital visits, physical therapy, or help with medical equipment to support daily living. A recount from Luang Phi at Wat Sang Kaew Bodhiyan illustrates this commitment to health and public welfare, indicating a move beyond traditional rescue missions:

...We reached out to assist the underprivileged and bedridden, bringing them necessities. In those early days, we collaborated with community development veterans to identify households in suffering, providing the necessary information for initial help... The patients who were confined to their beds felt uplifted by the visits of monks and rescue volunteers as they brought not only moral support but also essentials like diapers, rice, and non-perishable food...

This approach underscores the supportive public welfare operations of Buddhist institutions, which broaden the rescue missions to address the four holistic developments (*bhāṇita-kāyā*, *-sīlā*, *-cittā*, and *-paññā*), encompassing physical, moral, emotional, and intellectual aspects (A III 106).

Lastly, the model of integrated public welfare operations emphasizes establishing a cohesive network. This network involves various stakeholders, including rescue groups, local public health personnel, community leaders, and relevant government organizations. The goal is collaborative problem-solving, creating measures and solutions that align with the community's needs. This approach is crucial for fostering enduring cooperation among temples, communities, and governmental organizations, ensuring a comprehensive and sustainable strategy. Field studies from this research indicate that initiatives centered on aid, charity, or social development without proper network support tend to face continuity issues, leading to superficial or short-term solutions. A prime example of overcoming these challenges is the Sang Kaew Bodhiyan Rescue Group. This notable rescue group has successfully built social capital and cooperation, mobilizing resources to continually develop its staff's expertise and operational knowledge. Particularly important is their ability to engage government organizations as active partners in developmental efforts, thereby amplifying the benefits to the community beyond conventional religious or charitable activities.

In examining the public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions, it becomes clear that their involvement significantly enhances the effectiveness of rescue groups. Direct support from these religious entities, whether in the form of donations, equipment, or financial backing, contributes tangibly to public benefits. This direct intervention is not only highly responsive in emergencies but also harmonizes with the structural mechanisms governing these operations, providing both support and a necessary framework of accountability. However, this structural arrangement also presents certain limitations on the monks' social initiatives, requiring them to negotiate within these boundaries to maximize their societal assistance through public welfare activities. Therefore, the involvement of religious figures, such as monks, extends beyond passive endorsement, as they actively engage with these structures to facilitate community support through their welfare initiatives (Laliberté, 2022). This nuanced role underscores the importance of adaptability and strategic partnerships in enhancing community-centric welfare operations.

Position in the Field of Emergencies: The Role of Public Welfare Operations of Rescue Groups Supported by Buddhist Institutions

Field data indicate that the roles of public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions fall into three primary categories:

The First Role: Pioneers in Problem-Solving

Monks, serving as leaders within these Buddhist-supported rescue groups, often engage in strategic discussions with local people to propel emergency response efforts in their communities. These sessions are pivotal, setting the stage for these groups to spearhead initiatives targeting community issues. The process is methodical and starts with a comprehensive assessment of community troubles. Because

these rescue teams are deeply rooted in the community, they can identify underlying problems, setting the groundwork for the second phase: understanding the root causes of these issues. This understanding hinges on community involvement and the utilization of temples as hubs for these critical discussions, addressing various aspects of people's livelihoods and broader socio-economic challenges.

These gatherings held at the temples facilitate the third phase: strategizing solutions for the prevalent community issues. Success at this stage depends on leveraging community resilience, local leadership acumen, and forging partnerships with relevant organizations. Together with the rescue teams supported by Buddhist institutions, these groups brainstorm problem-solving strategies. The subsequent fourth stage is the practical application of these strategies, where rescue groups become significantly instrumental in ensuring these initiatives meet the community's specific needs. After the practical execution, the problem-solving process culminates in a phase of refinement and further development of the solutions implemented. This phase is essentially a learning curve that provides valuable insights for handling future challenges more effectively.

The structured approach of rescue groups, supported by Buddhist institutions, embodies the practice of warrant interventions. They perceive emerging issues as disruptions to societal norms, striving for a cause-and-effect understanding to resolve these problems. This process demands a systematic method and involves the community collectively shaping problem-solving strategies. In Buddhism, this structured approach is manifested through adherence to the seven qualities of a good man (*Satta sappurisa-dhammā*), encompassing virtues that advocate for the welfare of the broader community while acknowledging individual capabilities. These principles involve recognizing the current state of things (*dhammaññū*), understanding consequences (*atthaññū*), self-awareness (*atthaññū*), practicing moderation (*mattaññū*), discerning the appropriate timing (*kālaññū*), integrating societal perspectives (*parisaññū*), and acknowledging diverse individual traits (*puggalaññū*) (D III 252, 283; A IV 113).

The Second Role: Becoming a Coordination Hub

Monks serve pivotal roles, offering guidance and support across various facets, thereby fostering the conditions for successful endeavors. The effectiveness of this stems from the societal respect, honor, and trust placed in Buddhist institutions, empowering them to inspire a spirit of cooperation and enthusiastic participation within community networks. As a result, rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions become social glue that can weave a social fabric that significantly bolsters collaborative efforts. This unifying role emerges from the distinct advantages possessed by rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions. They operate with clearly defined roles and communal norms, participate in a transparent division of labor, and manage their structure efficiently. Examples include life-rescue operations like Pho Ngern Rescue Group, Lampang Point Sop Prap Rescue association. In these settings, monks often take up leadership or advisory positions, while authorities from public health or local governance may serve as deputy leaders or consultants. These organizations delineate each officer's duties, establish clear operational territories, and frequently coordinate with national emergency medical services, directly engaging in rescue missions.

Having Buddhist institutions as the centerpiece is another distinctive feature of the rescue group's role in public welfare operations supported by Buddhist institutions. These institutions excel in broadening cooperation among community representatives, government organizations, private sectors, and other pertinent organizations, thereby nurturing social integration to enhance the living standards within communities. Moreover, these efforts are characterized by a network grounded in mutual trust, significantly attributed to the intimate involvement of Buddhist institutions in daily life. This dynamic underscores their pivotal role in shaping the social framework within these networks, ultimately cultivating a form of social capital that facilitates collaborative endeavors for shared advantages (Putnam, 1994; Mahaarcha and Sirisunhirun, 2023).

In Buddhism, the foundation of trust is solidified by six states of conciliation (*Cha sārāṇīya-dhammā*), which promote cordiality and unity. These principles encompass: maintaining respect and courtesy (through the bodily act of loving-kindness, both publicly and privately), engaging in polite discourse (through verbal act of loving-kindness, in both public and private interactions), adopting a positive view of others (through mental act of loving kindness, openly and privately), practicing generosity (willingness to share without reservation with virtuous individuals), adhering to disciplined conduct (upholding impeccable behavior alongside one's peers, in all situations), and pursuing aligned perspectives within the network (harboring common views with peers, both publicly and privately). These guiding principles foster a profound sense of cordiality and cooperation (A III 288–9; D III 245).

In the context of Bourdieu's theories, social capital is not just an indicator of group membership; it also expands the scope of advantageous social relationships, spanning both equitable and inequitable scenarios (Häuberer, 2011). It is important to note that social capital manifests in both quantitative and qualitative forms. Beyond merely encouraging collaboration across various networks, Buddhist institutions also contribute valuable cultural capital. This includes moral tenets and doctrines that instill consciousness and faith among followers, thereby securing support from the Buddhist community for humanitarian rescue missions. Cultural capital, in this sense, refers to the collective knowledge or skills acquired by individuals, forming an integral aspect of one's habitus (Häuberer, 2011). This is particularly evident in the way Buddhist monks assimilate teachings through their study of the Pali Cannon, subsequently sharing this wisdom in the form of knowledge and practical action.

The Third Role: Reinforcing the Resilience of Buddhist Institutions

This role epitomizes Buddhism's evolution towards a deeper societal involvement, a concept known as "Socially Engaged Buddhism." It expands its realm from solely psychological support to a holistic approach that includes physical, social, and intellectual welfare. This approach is manifested in the support of rescue groups, preparing them to handle various risks related to accidents, health issues, and fundamental living necessities. In terms of social and intellectual outreach, Buddhist institutions have become centers for educating and nurturing individuals, particularly the youth within these rescue organizations, encouraging a sustained commitment to volunteerism and community support. The participation of Buddhist entities in such social endeavors, termed "*Saṅgahadhura*," duties of the Saṅgha transcends the monks' traditional

duties which are “*Ganthadhura*,” duties of studying or teaching, and “*Vipassanādhura*,” duties of meditation. “*Saṅgahadhura*” encompasses the monks’ social welfare engagements, underscoring the adaptability of Buddhist institutions to societal needs.

The proactive societal involvement of Buddhist institutions marks a shift from their traditional practices, showcasing their capacity to apply Buddhist teachings to address contemporary issues and foster social justice. This engagement is grounded in awareness, solidarity, empathy, and a sense of personal connection to the broader world, motivating tangible actions to alleviate societal suffering (Queen, 2000). Such dynamic participation illustrates the practical applications of Buddhist principles like *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and compassion, also relating to the doctrines of Karma and liberation from suffering (King, 2009). However, during periods of social and economic turmoil, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a noticeable resurgence in the significance of religious institutions. These institutions have stepped in to provide guidance and stability amidst prevailing uncertainties (Boguszewski, Makowska, Bożewicz, and Podkowińska, 2020). For instance, Buddhist organizations have actively moved to support the Thai community during times of social disruption, addressing challenges such as unemployment, food instability due to lockdowns, and limited access to healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis (Sirisawad, 2021 [2564 BE]; Jearajit, 2022 [2565 BE]). These efforts highlight that the risks and impacts individuals face vary significantly, influenced by their social and economic positions (Mythen, 2004).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study underscores the significant role of Buddhist institutions in risky society, particularly through the public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions in Northern Thailand. This research addresses a previous gap in the Buddhist paradigm for Thai society, offering insights into how diverse Thai communities engage in public welfare operations. Rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions, undertake public welfare activities through three primary methods: providing assistance, communal support, and integrated strategies. The role of public welfare operations of rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions can be divided into three categories: spearheading problem resolution, fostering collaboration, and enhancing the resilience of Buddhist establishments.

These public welfare operations serve to accentuate the paradigm shift towards a socially engaged Buddhism. This transformation becomes particularly apparent through the proactive response to local issues by monastic leaders who demonstrate charismatic leadership qualities (Dow, 1987; Jirattikorn, 2016). The monastic community serves as a pivotal mechanism, enabling the mobilization of both social and cultural capital to address and alleviate prevailing issues. This is achieved by applying Buddhist principles in carrying out these initiatives (Queen, 2000; Häuberer, 2011).

Consequently, there is a noticeable expansion of monastic responsibilities, showcasing their capacity to meaningfully contribute to societal well-being, in line with the notion of alleviating suffering across all sentient beings (Main and Lai, 2013; Loy and Rothberg, 2014). This endeavor aligns harmoniously with Buddhist teachings, wherein the Buddhist institution collaborates with the public to foster peace and happiness within society (Vin I 21; S I 105; Bodhi transl. 2000: 198).

Theoretical Implications

Medical-focused public welfare operations of rescue groups exhibit a clearly defined procedural system for providing physical health assistance to the injured (Hillier, 1987; Cockerham, 2015). The integration of cultural capital as a fundamental ethical foundation of the Buddhist institution, enduring over an extended duration and esteemed for its intrinsic value (Swartz, 1997), has led to a restructuring of the operations of the rescue group framework. This restructuring has given rise to a volunteer ethos, encapsulated by a *Habitus Voluntarius* (Volunteer Habitus). A notable example is the rise of youth volunteerism within rescue groups supported by Buddhist institutions. This effort seamlessly aligns with the principles of the four sublime states of mind (*Brahmavihāra*).

The collaborative relationship between Buddhist institutions and rescue group operations has significantly drawn the lines of socially engaged Buddhism, particularly evident in the pivotal role assumed by the monastic community in the execution of life-saving interventions during emergencies. This role encompasses pioneers in problem-solving, becoming a coordinating hub, and reinforcing the resilience of Buddhist Institutions. More importantly, monks participate actively in societal activities, constituting what is referred to in this article as “*Saṅgahadhura*.” This involvement relies on the trust cultivated within the social network initiated by the monks (Putnam, 1994), where members of the monastic community or those affiliated with the network share a common purpose and remain mutually mindful of each other (A III 288–9; D III 245).

Practical Applications

Future studies may delve into the doctrines and practical approaches suitable for monks who focus on development, ensuring alignment with traditional monastic disciplines, and the overarching guidelines of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand. This approach will help cultivate practices befitting the evolving roles of monks in modern Thai society. Furthermore, there is ample room to broaden the research scope concerning those involved in rescue missions, especially the volunteers braving societal risks as “hazard laborers.” Their lifestyles and experiences, influenced by Buddhist teachings, present a largely unexplored area that requires sociological and anthropological scrutiny. Furthermore, a study of the social lifestyles of rescue volunteers under the principles of living is an interesting topic for future research. In terms of practical applications, extending research to community skill-building for rescue, centered around Buddhist institutions, could be incredibly beneficial. Extracting and implementing the lessons learned from these studies could pave the way for better risk management in local communities.

These academic insights can be translated into real-world applications. This transformation not only involves leveraging findings to enhance a Buddhist-centric research network for societal betterment but also ensures that the practical management of Buddhist wisdom is used to aid social programs. Such actionable knowledge could prove invaluable to the Sangha Supreme Council’s welfare committee, aiding the expansion and efficacy of monk-led developmental networks. On a practical level, support could be provided for the council’s welfare office to develop comprehensive databases and strategic frameworks. These tools would propel Buddhist social initiatives forward and guide future network developmental endeavors spearheaded by monks.

Ethics statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, The Second Allied Academic Group in Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine and Applied Arts, Chulalongkorn University with the approval number: COA No. 282/2564, dated 16 November 2021 and the Human Research Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University with the approval number: SWUEC296/ 2564E, dated 25 November 2021 approved this research.

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Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article or its supplementary materials. Raw data is available from the corresponding author on request.

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