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Failure of public participation for sustainable development: A case study of a NGO's development projects in Chonburi province



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the importance of landscape analysis in designing the public participation process for rural sustainable development projects, using a case study of a non-governmental organization (NGO)'s development projects in Chonburi province. Mixed methods were applied, using focus group and in-depth interview techniques with the former members of a community-based organization and the NGO's staff members, and quantitative data derived from 250 questionnaires which were gathered from the former targeted group of that NGO. The results of this research found that the lack of impact of landscape analysis on the spatial distribution or density of the target population had become a significant intervening obstacle in promoting public participation. It has also resulted in a proportionate discontinuity of the process of the development projects. Specifically, the size of and the space between human groupings, together with the different physical environments of each specific area, have resulted in some targets becoming marginalized from full participation in the development project. Additionally, some other target areas were not willing to join the project due mainly to their way of life and economic conditions, and these two factors are in turn the result of the geographical environment.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, balancing the dynamic interaction between rapid national economic growth and rural community development has been increasingly and considerably of concern to both governmental and non-governmental agencies. Their main purpose is to maintain a state of sustainable development. This has become a substantial scheme of developing countries for their poverty reduction policies (Elliott, 2006; Kates, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005) together with environmental

protection and natural resources management, whereby community engagement in the development processes is encouraged (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005; Lowe, Ray, Ward, Wood, & Woodward, 1998; Oakley, 1995; Pieterse, 1998; Tango International, 2009).

In the case of Thailand, public participation in the development process was initially promoted around 1982, during the launch of the 5th National Economic and Social Development Plan (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board [NESDB], 1982). Most of the targeted communities were poor and marginalized, and differed in landscape, natural resources, and socioeconomic conditions. Not only have government policies been put into practice, but there have also been many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working closely with

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rural people in these areas. A basic philosophy underlying the efforts towards sustainable development of such NGOs is to promote community-driven development with the aim of empowering villagers to be able to control the resources needed for managing their own livelihoods. An ultimate goal is that the target population would be provided with a participation scheme in the development process and thus achieves self-reliance (Suthinarakorn & Traimongkolkul, 2002).

To make the development process sustainable, based on social development principles, public participation is a prime requirement, and the establishment of a community-based organization for the sake of improving the rural people's livelihoods is usually a primary choice (Kates et al., 2005; Leeuwis, 2000; Lowe et al., 1998; Oakley, 1995). Nevertheless, there are several examples showing the abolition of community-based organizations due to the lack of public participation in development projects. The lack of people's interest due to their ways of life, economic conditions, and occupations has always been proposed by many rural development researchers as an important factor (Jaisue, 2014; Mala, Wongpreedee, Thumkosit, & Dhirathiti, 2012; Shigetomi, 2006; Usavagovitwong, Jirawatthvee, & Chairattananondha, 2013). However, as observed, these researchers did not pay enough attention to the essential determinant factors which resulted in such problems. With this argument in mind and applying the landscape analytical approach, the findings of our research on an NGO's rural development project which covers three sub-districts located in Chonburi province, Thailand, discovered a new factor which has become a significant intervening obstacle in promoting public participation. It is that the influence of geographic conditions has affected not only the settlement patterns of the people, but also determines the degree of public participation in the development processes which has resulted in the discontinuity of the development projects. Thus, the objective of this paper was to investigate the importance of landscape analysis in designing the public participation process for rural sustainable development projects. Importantly, due to the interdisciplinary approach of the research, this paper could be useful to both NGOs and government agencies in their efforts to develop other development projects in the future.

Theoretical Principles

There seems to be a dichotomy between the two disciplines when we compare the theoretical foundations and principles of social development with that of geography, even though academics in these two disciplines put enormous effort into studying the interaction between human activities and their environment, or vice versa. In the current state of socioeconomic conditions, which can be seen as much more complex and dynamic in ways that were not evident in the past, interdisciplinary approaches to studying and implementing development projects are widely discussed in both fields (Elliott, 2006; Kates et al., 2005; Pearce & Atkinson, 1998).

Apart from considering the relevant fields to a development area and putting such ideas into practice, what has

been much in debate is to what extent each of the disciplines and approaches should be integrated for implementing a development project in order to achieve the objective of sustainable development (Lowe et al., 1998; Ramsey, Abrams, Clark, & Evans, 2013). With this initial argument, this section provides the analytical factors relating to sustainable development in the course of the intercalation of the nexus between physical landscape and public participation in the development process.

Public Participation

In a literal interpretation of "Our Common Future", a World Commission on Environment and Development report in 1987, the aim was to reduce some kinds of human activity to the extent where they might not affect the surrounding environment and natural resources. Since then, the concept and its meaning as well as a possible mechanism for promoting sustainable development and the forms of indicators for measuring sustainability have repeatedly been deliberated upon, both at national and international levels, from universities to national governments and on the international stage (Elliott, 2006; Kemp, Parto, & Gibson, 2005; United Nations, 2010). Evidence for this could be perceived at the Rio conference in 2012, focusing on institutional arrangements and their capacity to balance economic growth and natural resources, for instance (Clemencon, 2012; Leggett & Carter, 2012).

These debates are directly and indirectly claimed to be the result of non-linear dynamic changes in global and national socioeconomic conditions, as well as globalizing environmental problems and increasing inequalities and poverty (Clemencon, 2012; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013). These changes are unpredictable and uncontrollable, and the effects would become a barrier to the development process at the local level and of course sustainability as a result. In this regard, an alternative development has thus been promoted by various agencies, especially by local governments and NGOs. Local community-based organizations, such as community co-ops, occupational groups, and savings groups, are such instruments, aiming at decreasing the impacts that might result from the mainstream globalized world.

This concept has widely been adopted in less-developed and developing societies, from Sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America and to Asian societies (Lowe et al., 1998). A fundamental concept in this is based on the assumption that a top-down approach is not suitable with development constructed from below, as it emphasizes a bottom-up approach with multi-stakeholder decision-making processes. Public participation, as many scholars have argued, is an essential requirement in realizing this concept (Carlsson & Berkes, 2005; Leeuwis, 2000; Lowe et al., 1998; Pieterse, 1998). This is because participation from below would not only loan legitimacy to projects in the eyes of the people who would be affected by the results of such development, but it is also assumed that the results of development projects would more or less meet the needs of them all. With this in mind, projects which involve participation and gain willingness from the people may possibly be sustained.

The Physical Landscape

As noted earlier, a number of studies have proposed analyses on how to manage local community-based organizations (Shigetomi, 2006; Suthinarakorn & Traimongkolkul, 2002; Tango International, 2009). Investigations of institutional models and mechanisms, as well as management approaches to capacity building, and ways to build cooperation among members of such organizations, is deliberately taken into account. However, a significant underlying problem for this study is that even if development concepts focus on how to balance the dynamic interaction between human activities and ecological systems, they rarely analyze the physical contexts of the target areas, as is implied in the works of Elliott (2006), Lowe et al. (1998), and Ramsey et al. (2013).

As stated by Liu (2008), “the relationship between human society and natural environment is a kind of eternal basic relation in which the origin of relations between human and geography is geography at first, and then the human follows”. The interpretation of this statement can cover not only the relationship between humans and the physical environment in general, but also includes the dynamic interaction between human socioeconomic activity and available natural resources in particular. The evolution of human societies is thus adaptive to natural environments in a dynamic pattern. At the same time, geographic environments have shaped the size of, and the space between, human societies, and have imposed degrees of restriction on the connectivity between them (Linard, Gilbert, Snow, Noor, & Tatem, 2012; Ramsey et al., 2013; Silbernagel, Martin, Gale, & Chen, 1997).

Consequently, the physical landscape, which has resulted partly in the spatial distribution or density of the population, has shaped the particular needs of the people, and has determined socioeconomic activities in such areas. Apart from households' economic activities and occupations, it has also been an underlying determinant factor in shaping the aspirations and intentions of people to participate in development projects promoted by government agencies or activists accordingly. Therefore, it can be argued that the physical landscape is a significant factor which affects not only the settlement patterns of the people, but also determines the pattern of development projects which should be designed for it.

Methodology

This investigation contains mainly qualitative research conducted by means of a case study: an NGO's rural development projects, covering approximately 650 targeted households in three sub-districts (Mabpong, Nonghong, and Nongkakha) located in Chonburi province, Thailand. Significantly, in the first two years after the end of a 10-year development period in 2013, almost all of development projects were at a standstill, while some community-based organizations had been abolished. Therefore, this case study approach was deployed analytically to analyze the principal factors which affected the process of bolstering public participation in sustainable development, particularly the influence of the physical

landscape. Quantitative data were also used to support the qualitative analysis. In doing so, multiple sources of data and information were systematically gathered and synthesized.

The focus group technique was conducted with 10 former members of the community-based organizations supported by that NGO. Purposive sampling was used to select the informants. Three informal community leaders from each sub-district were selected, while the other seven informants were selected from households in which their main occupations were different and their houses were situated in different areas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 NGO staff members, who had worked in such development projects. The data derived from both focus group techniques and the in-depth interviews were analyzed using content analysis.

Quantitative data were derived from 250 questionnaires out of approximately 650 former targeted households in the three sub-districts. Based on Yamane (1960), the data were determined at 95% reliability. Proportional stratified random sampling was used to calculate the sample for each area, while a random selection technique was used to collect the data thereafter. With the questionnaire, the item-objective congruence (IOC) was calculated, which the overall IOC scores were 0.830. The reliability of the questionnaire was also calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which the alpha level was 0.935. Quantitative data were analyzed in the form of number, percentage, mean, and standard deviation.

Results and Discussion

In general, the physical landscape of the three sub-district areas is a river basin suitable for cropping and livestock agriculture. There are also some industrial factories and warehouses located nearby the project sites. Some residents work on their farms, while others work in factories. However, economic circumstances and the way of life are still considered to be poor, with most residents living below the national poverty line.

At the onset, in accordance with the core value and strategy of this NGO in helping the vulnerable people and their family, the target population was selected based on their income and living conditions. They were then invited to join the development project from problem diagnosis to activity designation, and then from project implementation to project evaluation and reflection on the development results, respectively. A sense of belonging was embedded along with the development processes, with the aim of self-reliance and sustainable development. Nevertheless, according to the results of a reflection meeting after the withdrawal of this NGO in 2013, it was revealed that most of the target populations are still living under poor conditions. For example, the data revealed that 72.23 percent of the respondents earned a monthly income of less than 20,000 baht and 80.95 percent of respondents had more than four household members in their families. Specifically, the development projects which were conducted throughout the 10-year period were at a standstill.

In addition, a significant problem that was revealed was that numbers of those of the target populations who had

joined the projects had declined after a few years of operation, and, in some others, the degree of member's participation was similarly in decline. After synthesizing the data derived from the focus group, it was found that geographic conditions have played a significant role in impeding the target populations' participation in the projects, and have shaped the socio-economic conditions, the way of life, and sequentially affected the perception of target populations on the importance of the NGO's development activities.

According to the data, there were three interrelated factors affecting the process of public participation in sustainable development, namely: (1) the conditions of the area and the dispersed settlement pattern which inhibited communication and caused inconvenience for the people in engaging in development activities supported by the NGO; (2) the diversity of settled areas caused difficulty in establishing suitable activities needed for responding to the targeted groups in diverse but specific areas, and; (3) the imbalance between development activities needed for development and the number of NGO staff led to ineffective engagement of the staff with the community for project monitoring and evaluation, as well as for the process of project improvement. At the same time, the lack of people's interest due to their ways of life, economic conditions, and occupations also affected the degree of public participation in development activities. The results and discussion are presented in three parts, as follows.

Settlement Patterns and Economic Conditions

As discussed above, the human and physical environments impact each other. However, as observed, many social development researchers, including social development activists, have not paid much direct attention to the impact of the physical landscape on the spatial

distribution or density of the population, even if it is a significant factor in the eyes of geographers (Dorling & Shaw, 2002; Linard et al., 2012; Ramsey et al., 2013). This was also reflected by the results of the case study. Reference to the data derived from the focus group technique with the former members of a community-based organization indicated that there were two interrelated issues hindering them from joining the NGO's development activities at the project sites. The first was the distance between their houses while the second was their main occupation, as reflected in Figure 1. These two issues were related to their occupations, with the intercalation of economic conditions being subject to the topographic environment they live in, and this significantly affected their ability and availability to participate in the project site.

These observations can be explained by the data collected from the fieldwork. According to the data derived from questionnaires, 22 percent of the respondents were full time agriculturists of whom some had their own farmland while others did not, but rented land. Another 65 percent of the respondents worked in industrial factories and warehouses close to their houses. This was due to the lack of productive land. The remainder worked as employees in small enterprises. An analytical explanation obtained from the fieldwork suggested that those who worked on farms lived in a dispersed pattern quite far from the development project site. This, together with their better economic conditions than those who worked in factories and warehouses, made them unwilling to join the development projects.

In contrast, the settlement pattern of those who worked in factories was nucleated. Even if their houses were close together and close to project sites, working conditions still left them unavailable to participate in development projects. Considering these circumstances, in regard to the

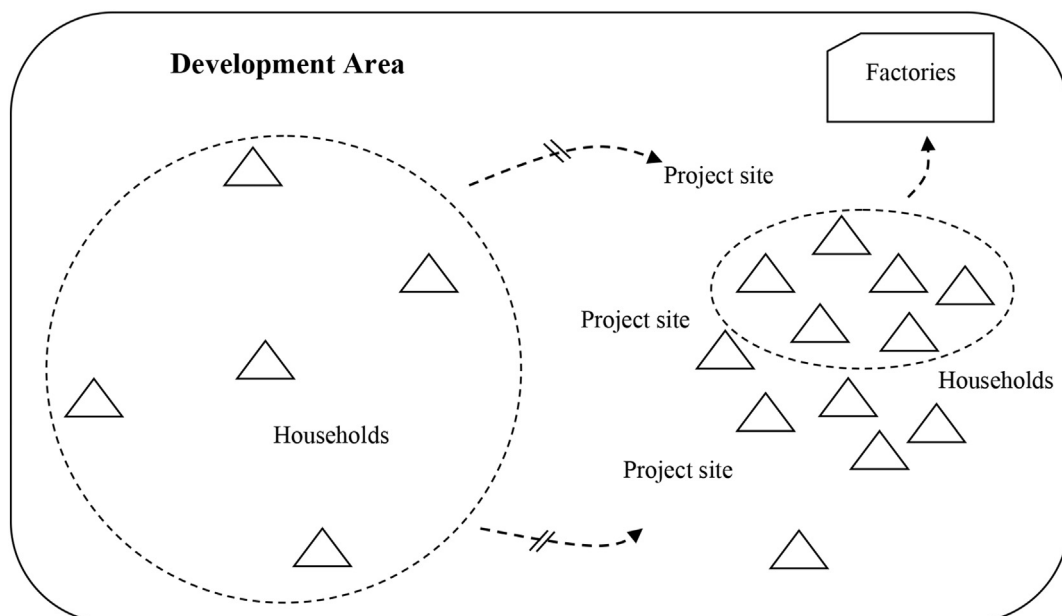


Figure 1 Context of development area

development process, even if the data on the problems and needs of the target populations had been available for project design, ways to conduct projects would still be in doubt as would the best way to promote group building, which may have paved the way to bolstering public participation in the sustainable development projects.

Project Design for Public Participation

It is a fact that rural development activity would not exist and continue without public participation. The people can participate in, or be willing to join, development activity if such activity is accessible for them (Shigetomi, 2006). In view of this circumstance, not only do geographic conditions affect people's occupations and their households' incomes, but they are also an important prerequisite condition for analyzing the design of development projects for a specific area (Dorling & Shaw, 2002). Also related to this is that such development activity can be continued if it is designed to correspond with individuals' and households' needs. This is related to what Leeuwis (2000) suggested, namely, each participatory approach is deemed suitable for a specific type of problem situation, in relation to which it aims to generate certain contributions.

Continuing from the above discussion, project design which can respond to people's ways of life is an important issue for development activists to take into consideration. This is explicitly manifested through cases in which development project designs were quite limited in variety and did not thoroughly respond to the needs of the target population, especially in generating household income. The main reason found was that, as limited by physical landscape, each area differed from others in both the environmental and natural resources available. Insofar as there are such differences between areas, promoting the full participation of the population in development processes must be upheld, especially in the first phase of the process, namely, the analysis of social contexts and economic conditions. However, as noted previously, public participation was only partially successful, as some of the target population was living quite far from the project sites, and as some were hindered by their occupational demands. A result of this was, of course, a limitation in project design for promoting public participation and for implementing development projects accordingly.

Continuity of Project Implementation

If the continuity of project implementation is recognized as a part of the requirements for successful sustainable development, promoting public participation in the implementation process is an essential issue. Parallel to this is the continuity of those who participate in project implementation (Mala et al., 2012; Usavagovitwong et al., 2013). An argument is that even if those who first participate in the project left the group, the project may be carried on as there are other participants who remain or there may be some new comers. However, implementation may not progress as it should, or may not be manifested in ways that respond to the needs of the people as its objective imposed at the onset. This means that collective

action among the target population must be encouraged. This is similar to what Shigetomi (2006) stated, namely, "such projects malfunction after the outside agencies retreat from the project site, suggesting that making organizations is not the same as making a system of making organizations".

Based on the results of the research, it is suggested that the settlement patterns influenced connectivity between the target population and the project site, and, in some cases, imposed the type of activity that should be promoted in a specific area. Another problem which resulted from the settlement pattern was that the staff of the NGO could not regularly monitor the project sites and activities due to a lack of sufficient staff at all project sites.

Conclusion

In the case of community development, there are multifaceted influences of socioeconomic changes which affect, to greater or lesser extents, development's progress and sustainability. More importantly, suitable solutions in coping with such dynamic changes cannot depend solely on instinct and experience, but require knowledge relevant to the context of a specific area with an interdisciplinary approach to project design and implementation. As discussed in this article, socioeconomic conditions in each area varied from each other which is due partly to the differences in physical landscapes and environments. This has also been a significant determining factor for development activists to take into consideration during the process of project development and implementation, and it somewhat influences the continuity and sustainability of the development as a result.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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