

A Future Model of Consolidation of Local Government in Thailand

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Abstract

What the villagers' need of local government consolidation can be is a key question to the answer, leading to the success of consolidation. This research aimed to investigate the components determining the success of small local government consolidations in Thailand through the examination of policy inputs, processes and outputs. This research applied participatory action research (PAR). The researcher employed an in-depth interview and large group discussions which reflected true needs, thoughts and beliefs of villagers, showing through the cooperation in the research between the researcher and the villagers. The results provided that the input factors of the local government consolidation involved the need for public services. In contrast, the consolidation process is about area allocation and structure of local government. The consolidation outputs involved a change of population and a decrease of kinship systems in local elections. However, to answer the question about the villagers' need of local government consolidation which brought about the success of consolidation not only reflected the phenomena, problem conditions, needs and living of local people, but also the villagers' beliefs, thoughts, attitudes and views toward the consolidation.

Keywords: Local Government, Boundary Reform, Municipal Consolidation, City-County Consolidation, Merger, Annexation, Amalgamation

Introduction

A trend of decentralization extends its influence across the world, especially to developing countries. As a result, a local government is expected to provide services to the people and it is necessary to upgrade a local government to be modern with a focus on efficiency and economies of scale (Askim, Klausen, Vabo and Bjurstrøm, 2016). One of the important tools for leveling a local government to achieve such modernization is called local government consolidation which is widely used in many countries. For instance, Japan has brought local government consolidation to strengthen regional development (Rausch, 2006). The Netherlands, USA and New Zealand use local government consolidation to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of local governments (Terlouw, 2018). Germany, Finland and Norway employ local government consolidation to deal with the distribution of local governments (Blesse and Baskaran, 2014) which is a design of new

boundaries and local subdivisions (Bruno, Genovese and Piccolo, 2017).

This is similar to Thailand. It has been over two decades since decentralization began in Thailand. The results of this decentralization since 1997 created five local government structures consisting of the subdistrict administrative organization (SAO), Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the City of Pattaya, a provincial administrative organization (PAO) and a municipality (city municipality, town municipality, subdistrict municipality). The determination of local government structures at that time was under the concept of the size of local government and the area conditions. This has caused problems to the current local governments. That is, a municipality is a local government ready for administration based on the local government structure under urban conditions, and it obtains revenue from the large population in the area. The SAO has a service structure under rural areas resulting in revenue limitations. However, its missions are not different from those of a municipality. Some SAOs supervise greater areas than a municipality does (Thanchai, 2014). Such problems cannot be solved by upgrading the SAO to municipality status. This is because the revenue of the SAO, its population, and economic conditions

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do not meet the conditions for upgrading. Therefore, local government consolidation has been widely discussed in Thai society in the past until there have been attempts to consolidate local governments with the goal of improving local government structures after decentralization.

Thailand needs to employ consolidation to solve problems relating to the type and size of local governments. It is considered that the number of 5,333 SAOs is too high when compared to Bangkok and Pattaya which have only 1 special local government. Overall, in Thailand there are 76 PAOs and 2,441 municipalities (30 city municipalities and 178 town municipalities, 2,233 subdistrict municipalities) (Department of Local Administration, 2017). It is believed that consolidation can reduce the efficiency and budgetary constraints of personnel and management (Office of the Commission 2, Secretariat of the Senate, 2017), duplication of administration, while increasing service availability, self-reliance, worthiness, mission transfer, economical action, large-scale economic development, and equal service between small and large local governments (Chulekha, 2017). This is a reduction of limitations in small local governments (SAOs) in numbers and a lack of budget, high personnel cost, limitations on size, the size of the population, residences and establishments.

SAOs require high personnel cost. Deducted from the entire budgets, the budgets for SAOs are limited and insufficient to respond to people's needs. SAOs cannot successfully provide public services for infrastructure. Local governments outside Bangkok have more limitations than those urban areas (Siriprapanukul and Sittiyos, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to increase the size of local government by consolidating small local governments to make them larger (Chatchawan, 2016) in order to improve public services and increase the ability to meet people's needs (Tangkijawanit and Unhakate, 2016). Although local government consolidation is believed to bring about benefits of increasing efficiency, capability, equality, economic development, and regional growth, consolidation has raised concerns for those involved by creating conflicts and differences between areas which can cause difficulties in administration, access to public services in remote areas, service inequality, area differences, and issues related to authority which affect tradition and culture, and lead to conflicts between communities and of service coverage (Office of the Commission 2, Secretariat of the Senate, 2017). However, the above information is a hypothesis

only.

In previous studies, there is a lack of evidence to confirm the components of local government consolidation. This is because most studies focus on consolidation conditions such as the size of the population, revenue of local government, and size of the area, etc. Such studies exclude significant components of local government consolidation related to people's needs or people's ways of life, including adjustment of local governments in the areas which could concern groups of stakeholders or could be affected by the consolidation. Therefore, this research aimed to fill the void of previous studies by examining the components of small local government consolidation in Thailand through analyzing the inputs, processes, and output factors.

Literature Review Consolidation

Consolidation has been spoken of for a century. The duration classifies it into six merger waves. The First Wave was between 1897-1904. It was a growing period for businesses and corporate mergers, especially in the industrial sector, to form monopolies. After that, economies of size were achieved (Martynova and Renneboog, 2008). The Second Wave was between 1916-1929. Mergers were used to deal with advanced technology. Many business sectors began to enter the merger process. This was a period of rejecting monopoly power. The Third Wave was between 1965-1969, when there were mergers of businesses with different production approaches, focusing on the mergers that enabled businesses to have a variety of strategies for entering new markets and increasing company value (Copeland, Weston and Kuldeep, 2004). The Fourth Wave was between 1981-1989. The business sector began takeovers in response to its business goals. The Fifth Wave during 1992-2000 took place due to the reduction of regulations. Takeovers were implemented to create market share.

Finally, the Sixth Wave was between 2003-2007. The mergers happened throughout all industries, such as the banks, with the support of the government to develop global businesses (Malik, Anuar, Khan and Khan, 2014). Each merger wave was mainly mentioned in the business sector. It is a collaboration between two or more businesses, and it focused on integrating the work and managing the assets of two or more organizations to become one under the same organization (Piesse, Lee, Lin and Kuo, 2014; Sherman and Hart, 2006). The consolidation creates a new organization and

causes the exchange of resources between the two organizations in terms of assets and liabilities within a new organization. The consolidation is considered a legal process in which one or more organizations have common purposes to establish a new organization (Saraswathy, 2018). Besides, the consolidation seeks growth potential and the returning of profits to the business. Consolidation may be defined as the combination of the strengths of organizations. Therefore, the concept of consolidation is a concept that focuses on efficiency and the ability to compete successfully in the business sector.

Consolidation includes horizontal consolidation, which is the combination of two or more businesses from the same industry, and vertical consolidation, which is the integration of the two businesses in the same industry that have outputs from different stages of production (Arora and Kumar, 2012; Okafor, 2019). Marks and Mirvis (2011) discovered that the motivation of both types of consolidation was to enable businesses to quickly enter new markets or create production areas or a risk mitigation strategy that managed opportunities and protect market share. Similarly, Sherman and Hart (2006) found that the key motivation for consolidation is related to a change of structure in the industry value chain, a response to the pressure of competitive costs in order to have economies of scale, technological process improvement, capacity enhancement, and the management of talent. It is believed that consolidation can be effective and can lead to new business markets and an increase in new product lines. In addition, consolidation leads to the belief that it can bring about rapid technological change. The business has an advantage with advanced technology management which leads to the ability to manage intense competition in the current business environment.

Local government consolidation

Previously, the merger waves were mentioned in the business sector only, and the key motivation was the economic and financial benefits. In 1952 in Japan, the Netherlands, and other western countries, consolidation was adapted to the government administration, which was local government consolidation (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg and Serritzlew, 2016). The concept emphasized the economies of scale. Some studies have shown that consolidation could enable government officials to find ways to manage budgets in reasonable and economical ways (Blesse and Baskaran, 2016). This includes achieving the economies of scope, which many countries have adopted, such as in Katwijk

and Goeree-Overflakke, the Netherlands (Terlouw, 2018), or even in the United States (Allers and Geertsema, 2016). Consolidation covers the capability of local governments, and modern local governments. The issue about local government consolidation is being challenged by researchers. For economies of size, the local government consolidation is based on the belief in cost reductions for public services which achieves economies of scale due to increasing the size of a local government, and it is believed that a large local government can produce low-cost public services (a low-cost service is considered to be a cost reduction). For economies of scope, Dollery and Crase (2004) explain that economies of scope are like a joint production which has the advantage of producing goods and public services through a single local government. It is believed that such guidelines lower production costs further. Therefore, it is believed that the size of local governments from consolidation may have a positive effect on the efficiency of public services (Abelson, 2016; Linze and Niels, 2016).

In addition, the concept of local government consolidation discusses the capability of local government. The concept of local government consolidation, especially during the 20th century, holds that if the government wants a local government to have the capability provide efficient public services, serve public needs, and provide effective management (Carr, 2004; Fleischmann, 2000; Hansen, Houlberg and Pedersen, 2014), it is required to restructure local governments by consolidating local governments to have progressive reform and to steer the local governments towards new regionalism to move towards becoming a modern local government.

Components of local government consolidation

The majority of inputs of local government consolidation is the needs that come from the expectations toward the impact of the lack of ability of local governments. The needs are related to developing complex services which such services were provided with limitations. In addition, those tasks require a local government to have a suitable for service (Pugliano, 2015). For process of local government consolidation, it generally begins with defining areas and local governments that need to be consolidated. Next, the structure of a local government is defined. This is related to managing administration, human resource management and local management policies (SGS Economics and Planning, 2015). Then, the consolidation strategies are defined. Finally, the method of consolidation

was stipulated by the government's authority to support the consolidation (Dollery and Grant, 2009). Therefore, the input factors and the consolidation process lead to the outputs of local government consolidation. Outputs of local government consolidation show a summary of inputs and processes which lead to a conclusion

about the consolidation in several dimensions. It begins with a starting point of consolidation which determines a consolidated area and consolidation strategy. It determines whether it is the consolidation of all small local governments or possible local governments.

Framework of analysis

Table 1. The components of small local government consolidation in Thailand

Aspect	Factors
1. Input factors of the local government consolidation	X1: Need for public service on education. X2: Local government is small. X3: Equitable service.
2. Local government consolidation process	X4: Area allocation. X5: Determining public service areas. X6: Restructuring to be a municipality.
3. Local government consolidation outputs	X7: An increase of size and population. X8: A decrease of kinship systems in local elections. X9: An increase of people's expectations.

Based on the review of the literature, a framework of analysis is reached consisting of the following: components of local government consolidation through inputs which can be the need for consolidation; consolidation process which is the area management and local government structure leading to outputs which are a summary of local government consolidation

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach. The data used in the qualitative research were obtained from several sources. For PAR, in-depth interviews and small and large focus group discussions were conducted, while content analysis was performed to analyze the data.

Case selection and rationale

The case study of this study includes the areas in Wat Khanun Subdistrict and Ching Kho Subdistrict. These subdistricts are under Singhanakhon District, Songkhla Province, in Thailand. These areas need local government consolidation. The physical characteristics are suitable for consolidation in terms of similarity of livelihood, people's ways of life, and transportation systems connecting the two areas. In addition, the locations of the communities are close to each other and both areas are flanked by local governments.

Data collection

By using the PAR method, the researcher collected the data from eight network representatives from all studied areas, 56 small

group members and 96 research participants. There were 160 persons in total (in Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts). The data collection was divided into in-depth interviews via telephone and a face-to-face method with 2-3 small group members and 5-6 large group members.

Findings

Input factors of the local government consolidation (X1-X3)

The input factors of local government consolidation in the areas of Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts include the needs for public service on education, small local government and equitable service.

X1: Need for public service on education

The investigation revealed that local government consolidation was based on the need for assigning the local government in the area to be responsible for the size, number of personnel, and the budget sufficient for the provision of education services including establishing a school in the relevant area. This was because most of the villagers believed that they received public services related to education which were different from neighbouring areas, especially from the areas of responsibility of Singhanakhon Municipality and Muang Songkhla District. These educational areas provided institutions offering high school level education, which was different from their areas. They lacked educational services which should be provided by the SAOs in their areas. As a result, their children had to move or travel to better

quality schools mostly located far from their areas. The schools near Wat Khanun Subdistrict and Ching Kho Subdistrict were under the responsibility of Cha Lae Subdistrict and Singhanakhon Municipality. Even if these schools were not far from Wat Khanun Subdistrict and Ching Kho Subdistrict, the education quality was considered low when compared to the schools located further away, such as the schools located in Muang Songkhla Subdistrict or in Hat Yai District. (X1)

“Small SAOs cannot provide education. As I know, it must be a municipality or large organizations. They don’t have money to hire teachers. SAOs don’t have enough money. If you ask me whether the local government consolidation is good, I think it’s probably possible. This is because size is better, more budget. They can hire personnel because they get more budget...” (Interview with the Ching Kho and Wat Khanun people, Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts, 1 June 2019).

X2: Local government is small

Size was an important part of making public services provided by local governments able to meet the needs of education, public health, utility systems (water supply for consumption), employment, and safety in life and property. However, the SAO that provided public services to the people could not provide such services due to the limitations on size, personnel, and budget. Changing the size of local government by using local government consolidation was one of the people’s options that gave the people hope for the quality of public services provided by the local government. The people’s expectations towards receiving public services from local governments had increased. (X2)

X3: Equitable service

The needs of public services among the people in several aspects were the input factors of the consolidation. These were based on receiving unequal public services when compared to the local governments in the area. For instance, when comparing the service potential of Muang Ngarm Municipality and Singhanakhon Municipality as well as the responsible areas under the local governments in other areas, most of the villagers thought that being under the area with a small local government had more limitations than being under a large local government. Therefore, the consolidation was necessary for enlarging their local governments. A large local government responsible for a large area could bring about bargaining power against the government,

provincial agencies, and local governments, especially the PAO. That is considered an important organization responsible for allocating the budget to support subdistricts and districts in the province. (X3)

“It is the question that I always ask myself why municipality is civilized. Municipality has everything but our area doesn’t. Just look at the municipality’s car park and you will see that it’s totally different from the SAO in my area...” (Interview with the Ching Kho and Wat Khanun people, Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts, 15 June 2019).

Local government consolidation process (X4-X6)

The local government consolidation process consists of area allocation, determining public service areas, and restructuring to be a municipality.

X4: Area allocation

The area that could not find a summary from the implementation of the research plan was the area in Ching Kho Subdistrict contiguous to Singhanakhon Municipality. This was because the villagers wanted to be consolidated with Singhanakhon Municipality. However, after the villagers considered the local government consolidation issues in terms of the difference in organizational structures, the size of Singhanakhon Municipality, its population, and its problems and responsibilities, most of them began to change their point of view. They tended to support the consolidation with Wat Khanun SAO since it was appropriate in terms of population, budget and organizational structure. The villagers also thought that even though Tham Nop SAO was located near their area, it was not appropriate, especially in terms of the proportion and location after being consolidated. Similarly, the villagers living in the area in Ching Kho SAO and in the area of Wat Khanun Subdistrict contiguous to Wat Khanun SAO were worried about the potential location of the new local government after the consolidation. The change in the local government’s location had been resolved by establishing a service network. (X4)

“It’s probably good if Ching Kho is consolidated with Wat Khanun. It’s not far and close to everyone. If the area consolidated, the office shouldn’t be too far. I’m worried about this. SAO office is like a front part of a house...” (Interview with the Ching Kho and Wat Khanun people, Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts, 1 July 2019).

X5: Determining public service areas

For the consolidation process, aside from

considering the allocation of consolidation areas and expanding service branches, the villagers thought that the overall issue should have a good public service distribution process, especially for the basic public services changed by the consolidation such as ambulances. After the local government consolidation, the consolidated organizations must spread the ambulance service points, which were at least located at the centre of the area. This should be considered based on the proportion of community distribution in order to speed up the provision of emergency services. However, this issue was slightly different. The villagers with status, income, and education, and the agriculturists who did not have stable income thought that it was necessary to live closer and receive such public services from the local governments at all times. This was because they had financial restrictions and could not afford private cars. The villagers with good status who were government officials or business owners stated that even though public service provision of the consolidated local governments was far from their residence, the distance did not create any difficulties in resolving an emergency. (X5)

X6: Restructuring to be a municipality

The consolidated local governments needed to be restructured to become a municipality. This was because the local government in the form of municipalities had extensive responsibilities and had larger budgets, especially subsidies. The restructuring of the consolidated local governments in the form of SAOs to become municipalities reduced expenditures by more than 70%, which were the personnel budget and operational budgets, while the revenue became higher. The aforementioned process was similar to an upgrade of local government. However, the upgrade process prevented the public service providers from conducting regional organization. The villagers thought that the method of restructuring the consolidated local governments in the form of the SAOs to become municipalities was appropriate. (X6)

Local government consolidation outputs (X7-X9)

Local government consolidation outputs consist of an increase in size and population, a decline in the kinship system in local elections, and an increase in people's expectations.

X7: An increase of size and population

After local government consolidation in Ching Kho Subdistrict and Wat Khanun Subdistricts, local

governments had wider areas of responsibility. The consolidation brought the total area of responsibility to 41.14 square kilometres, with a population of 13,694. The total population density was 332.87 people per square kilometre. (X7)

X8: A decrease in the kinship system in local elections

Since the density, population, and locations of each subdistrict were changed after the consolidation, the villagers believed that it would cause a decline in the kinship system in local elections and make local elections highly professional. Eligible voters would seek more professional local politicians to develop the areas. The kinship system of the local elections was considered a problem and obstacle for the villagers to get involved with the local administration in terms of criticism, complaints, or requests for public services. No complaints would be submitted to the SAOs due to respect for relatives, respected people in the community, and neighbours. The villagers were worried that a complaint or a request for services from the SAOs would create difficulties and have an adverse effect on local politicians. Most of the villagers were disillusioned and reduced their participation. Some even wholly neglected local participation. If the local government consolidation between the two areas took place and the two areas became larger, the kinship system in local elections would be reduced due to the changes of physical characteristics. The size of the population would increase while the diversity of the population, needs, and relatives decreased. The kinship system in local elections was boring for villagers who did not have sponsors or did not know anyone personally. (X8)

X9: An increase in people's expectations

The villagers believed that the local government consolidation would meet the people's expectations and most of the people were enthusiastic about the local government's services. The expectation towards public service provision by local governments for people was increased in terms of quality and quantity. For the quality aspect, the villagers expected that their areas would be developed not less than the neighbouring areas. This was similar to the quantity aspect. Therefore, the local government consolidation was like a tool that reflected the needs of the people. Most of the needs were related to the lack of public services. (X9)

"There is a hope. We get used to what we have now. If it changes someday, whatever it will be, like

the consolidation, it's like we restart..." (Interview with the Ching Kho and Wat Khanun people, Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts, 25 July 2019).

"It's is a point for us to think whether we should be like this. Looking at other areas, they are civilized. The consolidation stimulates the villagers' enthusiasm..." (Interview with the Ching Kho and Wat Khanun people, Ching Kho and Wat Khanun subdistricts, 25 July 2019).

Discussion

The research findings include the findings from this study and are consistent with previous studies, which consist of the following. The inputs of the local government consolidations are derived from the small size of the local governments (X2). This is similar to a study of (Pugliano 2015) in George Town, USA. The local government consolidation was adopted to deal with a size of the local governments. It was seen that a too-small local government would create problems and obstacles for regional and city services which requires high skill (Rosentraub, 2000; Fleischmann, 2000). This is similar to a study of Smith (2012) in North Carolina, USA. In addition, the input factor of local government consolidation is that the service provision was unequal (X3). This finding is not different from that of a study of Savitch and Vogel (2004) which found that the local government consolidation was adopted in many countries to reduce unequal growth between central and regional sectors.

However, these were caused by physical characteristics, geographical features and the nature of local governments. If the local governments were different in size, it would affect service capability and equitable service respectively. It was a common situation for those local governments that had different sizes. The findings reported in this research study are as follows. The input factors of the consolidation were caused by the need for public services on education (X1). Other studies showed that the input factors of local government consolidation were the development and improvement of public service provision in several aspects of local governments. For instance, according to a study of Pevcin (2018), there is a need to consolidate to meet a goal of economies of size in Slovakia and in developed countries (Aulich, Gibbs, Gooding, McKinlay, Pillora and Sansom 2011; Askim, Klausen, Vabo and Bjurstrøm, 2016) including in New Zealand (Fathimath, 2017) or Netherlands (Terlouw, 2018). Additionally, it is different from a study of Rausch in Japan (2006). It was found that the consolidation

was used to develop the regions. In Germany, Finland and Norway, there are consolidation or inputs with respect to the problems of local government distribution (Blesse and Baskaran, 2014) and a design of new administrative boundaries (Bruno, Genovese and Piccolo, 2017). These are key reasons in previous studies which are different from the findings reported in this research study. This is because there is a difference between the stated levels of local governments' potential by the local governments. It was found that consolidation was used to develop and improve public services by local governments without problems about basic public services. This is different from this research study.

For the process, the findings are new findings from this research study which consist of the following. The consolidation process involved restructuring to be a municipality (X6). Also, there was the determination of the public service areas (X5). These are the special characteristics of each area. The consolidated local governments could not create any changes by using the consolidation process alone. According to the local government structure previously designed, the local government consolidation process required the various tools mentioned as an important part leading to consolidation.

In the findings of this research study and previous studies, for instance, the consolidation was about area allocation (X4). This is similar to analytical suggestions of Feiock and Carr (2000); Palmer and Lindsey (2001) which emphasizes on the formation of consolidation processes by means of public consultation, referendum, local council vote, court, state legislature and state law as well as education in different countries. For example, Pugliano (2015) conducted a study in Delaware, USA. It was found that the consolidation was necessary to consider the expectations of stakeholders who both received the impact and benefits. This is similar to the state of Friborg Switzerland (Strebel, 2018) and Japan. Miyazaki (2018) found that the consolidation should allocate new areas. Finally, Uden (2016)'s study looked at the allocation of new areas on the basis of consolidation of different areas such as urban area and rural area. These were common characteristics of the consolidated local governments which needed to allocate the area again to merge civil local governments when classified by different areas.

For the consolidation outputs, the new findings are as follows. The kinship system in local elections decreased (X8), and the people's expectations

increased (X9). However, the consolidation outputs depended on the search for areas, input factors, and the local government consolidation process. If such a process was highly changed, the outputs would change. In this case, it was caused by the unique characteristics of areas. The villagers had problems and obstacles due to a lack of basic public services leading to the expectation of consolidation. This reflected the fact that the consolidation outputs consisted of several issues. It also offered villagers and local governments the chance to participate in designing a local government after the consolidation. As a result, it contributed a lot of benefits according to people's needs. The findings from this research study and previous studies indicated that consolidation outputs were related to an increasing size and population (X7) (Rizzi and Zanette, 2017), which was a general condition after local government consolidation. However, past studies focused on a minimum population of consolidation. Specifically, local governments with a population of less than 5,000 will be consolidated and considered that what causes and products of consolidation will be. For example, consolidation increased a size of local government and lowered the cost due to the reduction of local committees (Thom, 2001) or the creation of consolidation options such as consolidating small local governments, not consolidating different local governments reduce expenses (Rizzi and Zanette, 2017). It was believed that a larger local government enabled efficiency of public services.

Conclusion

The inputs, process and local government consolidation outputs are considered to be very important to the differences, failure and achievement of success of the consolidation. The differences, failure and achievement of success of the consolidation depend on local government consolidation outputs caused by input factors and process. If the input factors are driven by people and the process has changed, the local government structure will be highly changed. As a result, it can be believed the local government consolidation outputs can bring about the consolidation impacts in all direction. Therefore, the consolidation is like a designing tool for local governments to manage results according to the needs of those involved, rather than being a tool that is applied to obtain permanent results.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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