

## The Role of Local Government in Making Songkhla a Livable Place

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to study the role of local government authorities in making a livable city by using the case of Songkhla municipality as an example. The study explores how municipal authorities manage their tasks to develop their cities. The findings include proposals for approaches and policy recommendations for local authorities to help them manage livable cities. This qualitative research is based on a series of research methods, especially the following two: 1) a literature review of related studies, articles, and journals and 2) fieldwork data collection involving i) semi-structured interviews with 40 informants in the Songkhla municipal area and ii) focus groups conducted with participants from governmental offices and community representatives. Factors influencing the mobilization of the urban development policy of Songkhla City Municipality are: (1) setting clear policies and directions, (2) proper management style, and (3) the public participation in supporting livable city policies. Several policy recommendations for the mobilization of urban management tasks are also given. Most important is the recommendation that all issues concerning urban development policy should be considered a basic duty of the local authorities, and should be accomplished with a consideration for their compatibility with the local context. This requires the integration of competent personnel into the cooperative mobilization effort; personnel who can share their visions and overall ideas. Government mobilization

for the task of urban management is a civil matter and a right of the public.

**Keywords:** Urban management, local government, livable city, municipality, Thailand

### 1. Introduction

It is predicted that the world's population, over the next two to three decades, will become more concentrated in urban areas [1]. Southeast Asia is a region that is steadily urbanizing. In 1950, only 15.5 percent of its population lived in urban areas. In 2010, it was 41.8 percent (or about 250 million people), and this is expected to increase to 50 percent by 2025. In Thailand, 34 percent of Thais are currently living in urban areas [2].

From the Brundtland Commission in 1987, the report titled *Our Common Future* proposed the “classic” definition of sustainable development: “*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” [3]. The commission also listed “urban challenges” as one of the most important issues for sustainable development. The sustainability challenges listed for cities focused on inadequacy in environmental services, such as potable water, sanitation and waste management, and housing and transportation [4]. The idea of sustainable development, involving environmental, economic, and social considerations, plays a central role in the ways that many policies are now defined [5].

The essential meaning of urban management is defined through the achievement of the simple but fundamental tasks of 1) planning for the provision and maintenance of a city’s infrastructure and services and 2) ensuring that the local government keeps the city in a fit state, both organizationally and financially, in order to ensure the aforementioned provision and maintenance [6]. Undeniably, local government is the main actor that influences the management of a city. It will thus need to take the crucial leadership role of encouraging all stakeholders to take responsibility for the success of urban development [7].

Marshall and Wray go further, pointing out that two trends challenge the management tasks of local government. First is the need to improve the performance and results of local management. Second, there is a growing concern about the people who participate in the problem solving [8]. Hence, local governments must act as “*multi-contact organizations*” when handling tasks in their area [7]. As the current trend in any development project is to make public participation a key feature, it is thus vital to include many stakeholders at every stage in any urban development scheme.

Songkhla City is considered to be the southern capital of Thailand. It is a tourist center with many popular destinations, such as Samila Beach, Laem Son-on, and Kow-Tangkuan. The main economic activities are fishing, trade, and services. There are also different industries in Songkhla, many of which are seafood based (e.g., fresh seafood, preserved seafood, and frozen seafood factories). The City of Songkhla is located in Songkhla Province in the south of Thailand. It has 87,245 people, comprising 17,602 households. It comprises an area of 9.27 square kilometers. The city is located on the cape at the outlet of Songkhla Lake, with the Gulf of Thailand to the east and the lake to the west [9].

## 2. Research Objectives

In this paper, the example of Songkhla municipality will be used as a case study to examine how local authorities make the Songkhla city a livable place. The research aims to determine what factors, such as the motivation of the local elected officials, the local administrative system, and the involvement of local residents, affect urban management tasks.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study principally involved the use of qualitative research methods to describe a mechanism for how local governments and community residents can cooperate in undertaking urban management tasks. It focused on Songkhla municipality, located in Songkhla Province in Southern Thailand. The data collection and fieldwork were conducted between March to May, 2010, and also in July of 2010. The data was collected via a number of means. Secondary data came from a review of previous studies and an analysis of their relation to the Songkhla case. The main sources of data, however, were the Master’s thesis and its accompanying research. The primary data was obtained from semi-structured interviews and group interviews. In these interviews, qualitative data was gathered from local government officials and community members. A number of questions were prepared beforehand. There were a total of 40 key informants from Songkhla municipality, including municipal officials, representatives of local groups, and representatives of community organizations.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 The Profile of Songkhla City

Songkhla is the center of administration and education in the southern part of Thailand. Moreover, this city is richly endowed with abundant natural resources and is very well known for its unique tourist destinations, which are located along the beach, three kilometers from the city center.

Songkhla City is one of the oldest settlements on the southern peninsula. It has a long history, going back for more than a thousand years. In the third and fifth centuries B.C., Western vendors used this port city frequently, though its name then was “Singora” [10]. In those times, the area was an important port serving an ancient maritime trade route linking India, China, and Cambodia. Moreover, the city was also a center of local administration for the south of Thailand during the reign of King Rama the Fifth. Today, historical buildings still exist in some parts of the city center and the surrounding area. Some of the buildings in the city center were constructed during the very earliest period of the city. They were made from bricks and cement, and were built in the Sino-European (Sino-Portuguese) architectural style.

In Songkhla City, nearly 54 percent of the land area is controlled by the government. Educational institutes, military bases, religious buildings, and parks are located on this land. Residential and commercial areas are squeezed into the remaining 46 percent. In 1949, Songkhla was formally designated as a *town municipality*, and after rapid growth of the town, it was elevated to the status of *Songkhla City Municipality* in 1995 [9]. The city received the Livable Municipality Award in 2005.

#### **4.2 The urban management policy of Songkhla Municipality**

Over the last ten years, Songkhla city has been developed according to the policy of its mayor at the time. In the year 1999, *Mr.Uthit Choochouy* was mayor. His major urban development policy was focused on physical development, especially landscaping. A major development strategy for the city was undertaken based upon the concept of “*City for living and city for traveling.*” This can be seen in terms of the radical physical changes and infrastructure development which took place in the city. Furthermore, another concept sought to promote Songkhla city as the “*Living room in the South*” [10]. This resulted in

several outcomes for both city dwellers and tourists. For city dwellers, many new recreation areas and open, green spaces were created. Songkhla also became a popular destination for tourists from nearby provinces and from Malaysia. Consequently, in 2005, Songkhla city was awarded the “Livable City Award” by the Department of Environmental Quality Promotion (DEQP) and the Thailand Environmental Institute (TEI).

In 2009, a new mayor, *Mr.Peera Tantiseranee*, was elected. His development vision has since been to promote the city as a “*City of happiness with a sustainable future.*” He has formulated various strategies covering the development of all groups living in the city and concerning all urban dimensions, including social, economic, and environmental. These proposed development strategies constitute his so called “Nine New Missions.” The social dimension involves new strategies regarding education, quality of life, healthcare service, religion, the arts, and culture-based development. For the economic dimension, focus is placed on local development via community drives. The environmental dimension involves strategies for the conservation of the old city and the refreshment of the “city’s identity” [11].

Lastly, the city mission statement itself matches the new concept for administrative and political development. However, during the last five years, there have been various kinds of the problems afflicting the city: beach erosion, traffic jams during rush hour, and an increase in population density.

#### **4.3 The local government system and its handling of urban management tasks**

After the elected local politicians make their decisions, their visions and political motivations guide municipal policies and plans. Later, those policies and plans are implemented by municipal administrative officials. Examples include the middle year plan (3-year plan) and the annual plan.

In the municipality’s organizational system, the mayor and deputy-mayor, who are the decision makers on municipal policy issues, are situated at the highest level. Below them is the administrative level, starting with the municipal clerk and the deputy municipal clerk, and extending to the directors of each division. The municipal officials handle municipal functions through the following divisions: 1) The Office of the Municipal Clerk, 2) The Public Works Bureau, 3) The Finance Bureau, 4) The Social Welfare Division, 5) The Sanitation and Environmental Division, 6) The Technical and Planning Division, and 7) The Educational Bureau. It can be concluded that, since its establishment, the local government has had the compulsory duty to deal with urban management tasks.

However, a range of further difficulties exists in implementing the urban management tasks. These difficulties stem from the nature of the bureaucratic system, which, as a top-down, hierarchical structure, is highly inflexible. It is also largely rule-based. This will be further explored in the discussion section.

#### **4.4 Public participation in municipal tasks**

There are various channels designed to provide local people the chance to participate in municipal decision making. The involvement of local people can be seen at two levels: the municipal level and the community level.

Starting at the municipal level, each year, the formal representatives of community organizations in Songkhla City are appointed to the “*Municipal Community Committee*” for the purpose of developing plans and procurement. The city has municipal plans, such as the municipal three-year plan and the municipal annual plan, which local people can contribute to. Moreover, a project entitled “*Municipality Meets People*” is organized once a year in each community. Care is taken to ensure that there is a good connection between Songkhla municipality and community organizations. This channel enables information

exchange between community members and the local government.

By looking at the involvement of local people at the community level, it is clear that community organizations are the main channel available for the local people to participate in municipal projects. The activities conducted for the community members can be initiated by either the municipal authorities or the community organizations themselves. Each community has to launch its own “community plan,” which refers to the plan created by the community members based on their desires. The projects and activities conducted at the community level cover all aspects of development—economic, social, and environmental. The most popular activities conducted at the community level are cultural or religious. Most importantly, the present mayor’s new policy, “*The Old City Conservation Consortium*,” has recently been promoted. This consortium runs its own activities in the area, with the municipality in a supporting role.

## **5. Discussion**

Crucial factors in making Songkhla to be a livable place include the following:

### **5.1 Setting clear policies and directions**

The local elected officials and their teams are the highest decision-makers in the municipal authority, and they are responsible for the formulation of local development plans and are in charge of all the administrative affairs of their municipality [12].

In Songkhla municipality, urban management directions during the years 1999-2009 covered all aspects of urban management, but especially focused on infrastructural development. This was done to ensure that the local people had accessibility to basic services. Later, the city landscape development projects were launched to promote the city’s tourist destinations. The history of city development in general, and that of ecological capitals in particular, was taken into account. Over the last ten years, the

ecological capitals served as the main inputs for development in Songkhla. Meanwhile, since 2009, another city project, this time a culturally based one, has been promoted. The “Nine New Visions” policy of the Mayor, launched in 2009, seems to be more holistic, as it addresses the three main aspects of urban management as well as including provisions for disadvantaged people and different local groups. It can be said that, in the effort of managing the city to make it more livable for all, all aspects related to urban livelihood should be addressed: social, economic, and environmental. The consideration of local context is, however, far more vital. Indeed, this is confirmed by Davey, who asserted that the improvement of urban management at the city level depends on the process by which decisions are made by local politicians to address the overall challenges of city development [13].

### 5.2 Proper management style

One common model of a local administrative system presents local elected officials as the decision-makers who take the most important roles in setting municipal policies, while the role of administrative officials is crucial to putting those decisions and policies into practice.

It cannot be denied that the local government authorities are perceived to be conducting their tasks via a system based on bureaucracy. Also, this system seems to be unsuitable to the rapidly changing world. As Sanders noted, the permanent nature of hierarchical structures is much less suited to today’s post-industrial society. Modern society requires flexibility and a speed of communication that traditional bureaucracy is hard-pressed to provide [14].

China provides a good example of a country with bureaucratic municipal administrative systems. The difficulties in managing urban development result from the local organizational structure. Other studies also indicate how a strict hierarchy causes particular

problems in communication within an organization between decision makers and field staff [15]. One new model for an administrative system proposes a flat structure, a short chain of command, a possible matrix-based organization, and decentralized power [16]. However, as Peters states in his “*flexible government model*,” the critics of permanence in state bureaucracy have conflicting views about the dynamics of the problems and the remedies required to produce a better public sector [17].

Findings from the Songkhla case confirm that in conducting the tasks, a change from a bureaucratic system to a more flexible administrative system is vital. The local staff members must adjust their management style to become less formal and to be more of a network-based style. Decreasing the hierarchical structure will result in a shorter chain of command which will make tasks easier to handle.

Moreover, the importance of the change made by local government authorities to begin playing a more “*proactive role*” in handing tasks cannot be overlooked. For instance, the municipal staff members could work after regular office hours, and on the weekends. This would allow the municipal government to respond more rapidly to changing social and economic conditions. For such a provision to work, however, local government officials need to be more flexible, more responsive to culture and public needs, and more performance-oriented, as opposed to rule-oriented [18].

The changing of the administrative system is very important, especially for conducting urban management tasks, because these tasks cover all aspects of urban development. A dynamic, diverse, and customer-oriented workforce is required.

### 5.3 The public participation in supporting livable city policies

One requirement for effective governing and governance is of utmost importance; namely, that all relevant parties should have an idea of all the

major problems involved, the backgrounds of these problems, and their potential solutions [19]. The emphasis of local government has shifted from the direct provision of in-house services to the collaboration of local authorities with a network of other agencies in the locality [20].

In Songkhla’s case, the question is how to ensure meaningful participation. The community members in Songkhla can be categorized into three groups: the wealthy, the middle-class, and the poor people. It was found in the course of mobilizing people for past community development projects that the grassroots people actually participated more than the other groups. As one representative of a community organization stated, *“It is because our livings are affected by the problems. It is us that try to find out the solution, and indeed, to ask for cooperation among the lower class people is not that difficult. For instance, they support the labor works. But, for the higher and middle-class people, to get them involved in community activities is not easy. Then, some of them support us in terms of in cash.”*[21]. The significant involvement of the grassroots people is due to the fact that they want to be involved in decisions which will directly affect them.

To get involved in community committees, the local people must first be available and be willing to devote their time to the community activities. Obviously, it would seem to be difficult for the poor, who have to work hard, to have time to join in community meeting and activities. Hence, the method of using formal organizations is not compatible with the lives of the urban poor.

The present mayor pays more attention to the voices of the community members than past mayors have. This is vital, as it provides the local people with an outlet for their ideas. It also is in alignment with the concept of “the involvement of the unofficial policy makers.” However, how can the meaningful participation of these groups of people be ensured?

As pointed out, the new approach that focuses on the concept of participation and cooperation is a shift in thinking from the previous mentality that government officials already know what is best for the people and hence do things the way they choose [22].

## 6. Recommendations

Policy recommendations for the mobilization of livable city policies by the local authorities are as follows. Firstly, at the decision-maker stage, all issues concerning the urban management policy of developing a sustainable and livable city should be the basic duty of the local authorities. The integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives into the local strategic and action plans needs to be addressed [15]. Furthermore, in moving towards better urban management, conditions within a city must be considered alongside conditions in the surrounding region and beyond [23].

Secondly, the administrative system requires organizational strengthening, with a focus on processes and systems in the administration, as well as the improvement of management structures or the organizational culture of the institution [24].

Lastly, at the community level, it must be recognized that successful urban management is a civil matter and a public right. The administrative body needs to stimulate the public’s participation, including all concerned sectors, in the planning of the development of the city and the implementation of these plans. For successful participation to occur, a number of elements must be taken into account [25]. Most importantly, a consensus must be built among all the stakeholders. The consensus can be built by negotiations, discussions, and idea sharing among the stakeholders.

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