

ROLES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING A NETWORKED GOVERNMENT

Kongkiti Phusavat
Kasetsart University, Thailand
fengkkp@ku.ac.th

Pornthep Anussornnitisarn
Kasetsart University, Thailand
fengpta@ku.ac.th

Sasivimol Meeampol
Kasetsart University, Thailand
fbussas@ku.ac.th

Suparek Sooksmarn
Kasetsart University, Thailand
fbussrs@ku.ac.th

Bordin Rassameethes
Kasetsart University, Thailand
fbusbdr@ku.ac.th

Thaneerat Siripachana
Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission, Thailand

Abstract:

The paper is based on the study sponsored by the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission (OPDC). The study aims to describe how to bring about public participation within the context of a networked government- working together with individuals, local communities, civic groups and association, private firms, and public agencies at all levels. The governing by networks concept points to the need to work together with its key stakeholders when responding to citizens' needs and demands especially social and complex problems such as drugs, accidents, and education as well as emergency responses to natural and industrial disasters. The OPDC, in cooperation of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (THPF), focuses on the road accident which is one of the top three leading causes of death in Thailand. There are two illustrations; i.e., road accident campaign and public awareness on the intersections between railway and roads. Information and knowledge play a key role in sustaining a networked government. The benefits from public participation are summarized with the discussion on the future steps.

Keywords: Knowledge management, networked government, and public participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Accountability, public or stakeholder participation, and transparency through check-and-balance and oversights have become the norm for all public agencies (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004; Eggers, 2005; Mofleh et al., 2008; and Gotoh, 2009). The complexity in the public sector's management has been compounded by emerging challenges such as budget constraints, aging populations and retirement, immigrations, urbanization, technological innovations, and expectations of citizens on governmental service (Hope and Fraser, 2001; Roy, 2006; and Reddick, 2008). According to Cohen and Levinthal (1990), Rantanen et al. (2007), and Shareef et al., (2009); the public sector needs to reassess its missions and paradigms under conflicting scenarios such as higher service quality with less budgets as well as less staffs (Jain and Kesar, 2011).

The use of social and organizational networks to improve the levels of public services and organizational performance has been the focus of the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission (OPDC). The OPDC has been the focal point for public-sector reforms since the early 2000s. The underlying interest is how public participation is mobilized and supervised. Then, the description of "how" should be mapped out. In cooperation with the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (THPF), the OPDC has decided to concentrate on how to prevent road accidents. The framework for a networked government was effectively deployed by the THPF since 2004.

The THPF was established in 2001 under the Health Promotion Foundation Act¹. The THPF is entitled to receive 2% of the excise taxes collected on tobacco and alcohol annually. The THPF's primary mission is to empower civic movements to ensure sustainable well-being of people. The THPF is a member of the International Network of Health Promotion Foundations. THPF has joined international workshops and conferences organized or sponsored by this international foundation.

2. METHODOLOGY

For this study, the road-accident prevention program during the New Year campaign as well as the intersections between the rail and roadways are chosen. The next step involved the interviews, the discussion, and the site visits with the THPF's key stakeholders. These stakeholders included the Accident Prevention Network or APN organization, Department of Highways under Ministry of Transport, the Royal Thai Police Department, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation under Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Public Health, Department of Corrections under Ministry of Justice, State Railway of Thailand, local administrations, and private operators such as a gas station operator, etc.

3. KEY FINDINGS

Strategically, due to its neutral position, the THPF has been able to work with different partners effectively. The THPF has worked closely with the APN organization². The APN has dealt with local agencies and communities while the THPF has worked with public agencies and private firms at the national level. It is important to note that the THPF and the APN have long recognized that road accidents cannot be solved completely by law enforcements such as police. Public participation from various stakeholders is needed.

Traffic accidents have become a leading cause of death in Thailand, according to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2004). During 2000-2003, an annual injury rate from road accidents in Thailand was 13,000 persons per year or 1.5-2.9 persons per hour. Based on the report, traffic accidents were ranked behind only cancer and heart diseases in terms of the cause of death among Thai people. The Cabinet Resolution on July 29th, 2003 instructed the THPF to find a way to improve road safety in Thailand.

Due to the limited size but having to deal with the national-level scope, the THPF had conducted extensive studies and, based on their findings, concluded that the road accidents were linked to five key areas: (1) a lack of strict enforcement, (2) ineffective dissemination of information or ineffective

¹ Source: <http://www.thaihealth.or.th/index.php>, retrieved on 2/21/2008

² See <http://www.accident.or.th/>

education to the general public resulting in a lack of awareness to change behavior and attitude towards road accidents, (3) poor engineering design relating road designs and traffic signs- need to work with private firms, especially insurance companies along with Department of Highways and Department of Rural Roads, (4) emergency response service or EMS, and (5) evaluation in order to come up with appropriate future policy recommendations. In other words, the road accidents were caused various reasons. There were alcohol consumption, unsafe behavior (e.g., too sleepy or too tired to drive), poorly-built roads and mediocre road signs, and drivers' unfamiliarity with the roads. An effective network needs to involve all relevant parties relating to the five areas identified earlier.

Both THPF and APN employ three approaches to ensure the strong linkages maintained within a networked government. The first one is information sharing (from the education area). For examples, for the highways leading to the south, the highest accident rate typically occurred during 6-10:00 PM. Prior to the deployment of a networked government, this information was not disseminated from three local hospitals to the police. Unfortunately, police checkpoints were generally established after midnight. The reason was that these checkpoints aimed to detain drivers under influence. However, more accidents were attributed to tired or fatigue drivers.

The second approach is to look for a win-win circumstance for all involved stakeholders. The APN cooperated extensively with local gas- station operators (mainly Jet and Petroleum Authority of Thailand) while the THPF attempted to approach their parent companies in Bangkok. The APN staffs trained the gas stations' staffs in order to help them identify and differentiate between drunk or fatigue drivers. In addition, these operators allowed the convicts³ from Department of Corrections to provide vehicle inspection services. These convicts were also placed at police checkpoints— helping police officials in distributing water and refreshments for fatigue drivers who wish to rest. The APN organized both instructors and students from technical colleges for checking vehicle readiness— preventing road accidents.

The third approach is to employ social marketing to help mobilize public opinions. These opinions have two implications: (1) accelerating the sense of social responsibility among targeted network partners, and (2) influencing public policies. Prior to the campaign, both the THPF and APN arranged the trips to the Government House (where the Prime Minister works) with the victims and family members who lost the loved ones to traffic accidents. This trip is usually accompanied by large groups of reporters which makes headlines in all printed and electronic media.

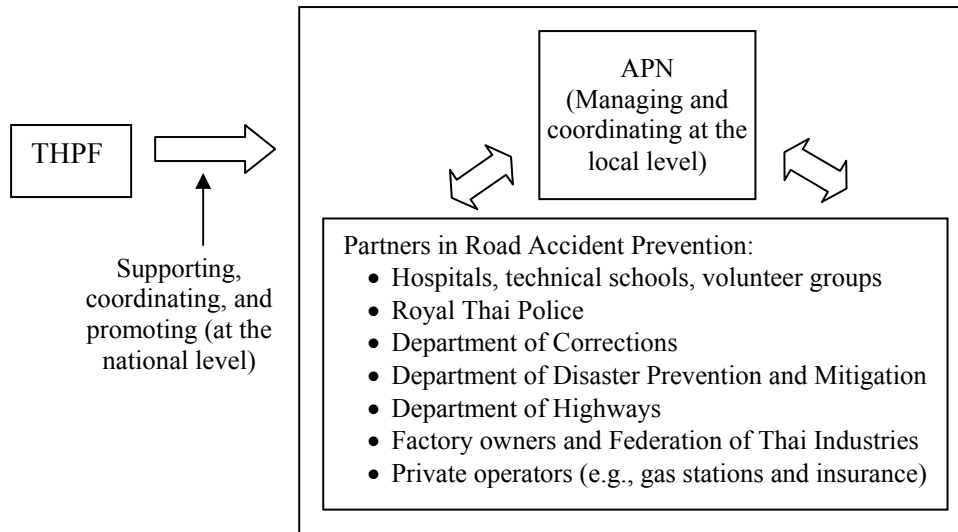
One of the most important findings is that both the THPF and the ABN effectively synchronized their responsibilities, plans, and tasks. The ABN concurrently worked with local administrations, hospitals, associations (e.g., Rotary Clubs) to raise the awareness of the economic and social impacts from road accidents. Particularly, the cooperation from factory owners was sorted out to ensure that their workers had information relating how a road accident occurs. The ABN continuously worked with local communities and administrators for volunteers during its attempt to educate people about the causes of road accidents and how to prevent them.

From the interviews with the Royal Thai Police Department, its officers were more satisfied since they were better prepared for checkpoint set-ups. Information regarding to accident frequencies is highly appreciated by police officers. In addition, the APN and THPF assisted them in equipment/ instruments procurement such as computers and alcohol test. Due to the long budgetary process, a typical procurement for such equipments normally would take two years. From the interviews with hospital staffs, they were pleased with a networked government. This was due to reduced stress from long working hours, especially during the New Year. They noticed that since the networked government was introduced, they had been able to spend additional time with their families instead of being at their hospitals all the time. Both Departments of Corrections, and Disaster Prevention and Mitigation could clearly demonstrate their commitment towards public services. The data that indicated risk areas was also sent to Department of Highways for road- sign warnings and lighting improvements. Operators of gas stations as well as their parent companies in Bangkok were publicly recognized for their corporate social responsibilities— gaining image and goodwill. The factory owners expressed their satisfaction since they acknowledge that the injuries or deaths of their workers

³ They are paid on the daily basis in accordance with Department of Corrections' guideline and are recognized for their social services— resulting in jail- time reduction.

impact the operations and performance. See Figure 1 for the overall framework of road-accident prevention.

Figure 1: Networked Government for Road-accident Prevention



The results from having undertaken the networked government concept have been generally positive. Despite the rapid increase in cars and the length of highways, during the Thai New Year festival (so called the dangerous 7-day period), the fatality rate has remained stable with a slight decline (from the average of more than 350 deaths to 300 fatalities). Although the THPF and the APN are satisfied with the results, continuous engagement with network partners continues with new schemes and other initiatives to sustain the network effectiveness. These new ideas include the need to include local roads, religious organizations, students, and private firms for both financial and human resources support. News clips and short videos have been distributed to schools and workplaces for orientations.

After having mapped out the road accident problems, the next step of the study is to use the aforementioned framework to help address the accident problems at the intersections between the rail and roadways. During the past decade, the average fatalities have been more than 70 deaths with 160-70 injuries. The official accident records show that, on the annual basis, there are about 95-100 cases reported. Each case typically results in a direct financial loss of 15 millions Baht to State Railway of Thailand due to delays and repairs. Not only the losses of lives but also the economic impacts have become the key concern for all relevant parties. The THPF and APN are asked by State Railway of Thailand and Ministry of Transport to assist in planning and initiating public participation. Like the previous project, comprehensive studies are initiated. The districts with high accident frequencies are identified. Site visits to the locations reveals insightful facts and stories. In summary, the following key points can be outlined.

1. Standards and regulations issued for the crossings are not effectively enforced by the central agency since they are part of the local administration.
2. State Railway of Thailand cannot deal with local communities and administration individually due to limited manpower and financial resources.
3. Illegal crossings continue to grow (more than 650 locations) while the legal crossings without the signaling system are more than 1,100 locations. Enforcement alone has not been effective while spending more budgets to build the crossover and underpass is not feasible.
4. The local crossing authority belongs to Ministry of Interior which is in charge of local administrations (governments) while State Railway of Thailand is under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Transport. The Royal Thai Police Department is part of Office of the Prime Minister. For the crossing, the provincial governor is the chairperson of the joint committees which oversees the rail and roadway intersections. Unfortunately, for the three site visit locations, there has not been any meeting discussing the accident problems.

5. Local communities have not been aware of the significance of rail and roadways crossings in terms of behavior and alertness. The reason is that the railway tracks are not comprehensive and can be found in 47 out of more than 75 provinces. In addition, more people prefer to drive as it is more convenient as their mobility is not limited. As a result, the railway has not been the main transport for people and businesses.
6. Due to the lack of long-term investment, many locomotives used by State Railway of Thailand have become obsolete which contributes to untimely breakdowns. The schedule has not been observed so it is difficult to estimate the arrival time of trains.
7. The lack of driving disciplines in the rural areas due to low traffic density contributes to carelessness in observing warning signs.

Given the knowledge and understanding, the next step involves the identification of stakeholders in forming a networked government (in each of the three sites selected). They have included: (1) State Railway of Thailand, (2) local community leaders, (3) local administration, (4) provincial administration, (5) Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, (6) local Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) and other civic bodies such as temples as well as State Railway of Thailand's labor union.

After the extensive discussions with all key stakeholders involving with the rail and roadways accidents, it is agreed that it would be difficult to find an immediate solution. Promotion and social marketing need to be planned along with how to educate the general public in each local community. Changing driving behavior cannot be made in a short time. The budget from the central and local governments will take at least one to two years from planning to allocation which may not be sufficient to build the overhead and underpass passages. The following tasks are agreed to be implemented in the next three years.

1. THPF and APN (working with academic institutions, State Railway of Thailand, and Ministry of Interior) to develop two documents: (1.1) for local administration and local communities to request a legal crossing with State Railway of Thailand, and (1.2) for local communities to work with the provincial administration in requesting a budget to install signaling and other needed equipment to ensure safe crossings at an intersection.
2. THPF and APN (working with Ministry of Interior) to assist in budget preparation for future intersection improvements.
3. THPF and APN (working with local communities, and other civic groups) in developing a brochure and other appropriate media forms to teach school children about what drivers and passengers should do when crossing an intersection. It is hopeful that children will influence the driving behavior of their parents.
4. THPF and APN continue to raise the awareness and the impacts from the accidents to the general public at the national level. This attempt should be in parallel with the efforts by the current government in laying double tracks throughout the country. The double track scheme will have some negative impacts since it will allow the frequency will be higher with a greater speed.
5. THPF and APN (working with State Railway of Thailand and its labor union) in identifying high risk locations and promote success stories which have taken place in other local communities.

4. CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The success factors can be summarized based on the two cases as follows.

1. Public awareness of the impacts from road accidents is crucial. Information gathering and disseminations have played an important role in ensuring this public awareness. This is part of blending education, promotion, and social marketing.
2. Continuous study and information gathering are important. From THPF and APN, a networked government is sustained through up-to-date information and new knowledge (and not authority and chain of command). Public participation (in this case, it implies all key stakeholders which can be individuals, civic groups, associations and organizations, private firms, and public agencies) can be strengthened with information and knowledge. Money plays less important roles since a complex problem cannot be solved by one organization.

3. Identification of relevant stakeholders is critical. In addition, the roles of individual stakeholders and public recognition of their contributions are even more crucial in engaging and sustaining a networked government. Each stakeholder must be aware of potential benefits to be gained from participating in a networked government. The benefits from working together as network have to be pointed out.
 - a. For hospital staffs, the ability to spend time with their families is important. For hospital administrators, fiscal management can be achieved.
 - b. For the police, more effectiveness in setting checkpoints is pointed out.
 - c. For administrators from Departments of Highways, Corrections, and Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, the ability of their agencies to fulfill their missions is clearly communicated.
 - d. For private firms, the potential reduction in their economic loss is explained.
 - e. For State Railway of Thailand, the damages and financial losses can be minimized while local communities will reduce losses of loved ones. The local administration can become more active in solving public safety. Provincial governors are pressed to work with the local level (as Thailand has three layers in the public sector- central, provincial, and local). A provincial governor is appointed by the central government. This practice has been criticized over the years as a provincial government is not responsive to local needs.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Sustaining public participation over the period of time is always a challenge. Key learning from having worked with and observed THPF and APN provide a foundation for future studies. For the OPDC, creating a networked government through a regular bureaucratic channel appears not to be feasible since due to budgeting practices and a lack of information and knowledge.

To ensure better understanding of public participation (as part of a networked government), more international comparison and discussion with cases should further be conducted. In addition, due to the differences in the nature of the two cases (as the road accident prevention is an ad-hoc project that takes place during the dangerous 7-day period during the Thai New Year and the second case involves regularly-scheduled trains covering 47 provinces), the next step would be to consolidate and merge the similarities and to point out the differences.

Finally, future studies in the future can focus on emergency responses such as tsunamis, floods, and earthquakes. The underlying question is how a networked government can be formulated and become operational in an effective manner instantaneously. The reason is that it has been difficult to rely on the responses by the central government in large-scale natural and industrial disasters.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper describes a networked government which is possible through public participation. The study is based on the project sponsored by the OPDC in looking for ways to strengthen public participation. The organization under study was the THPF. The findings are based on the two cases. The first one is to observe how a networked government operates during the Thai New Year campaign to tackle road accidents. The second case is based on the efforts to reduce the accidents at the intersection between rail and roadways. In both cases, the roles of key stakeholders as well as what THPF and APN have performed are reported. Key learning and critical success factors are discussed. Finally, the study's implications and limitations as well as possible future research are discussed.

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Illustrations of Activities



