



## **From Democratic Community to Strong Democracy: Experiences from three communities in Thailand**

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### **Abstract**

The author presents a study of the democratic community and an analysis of the relationship between democratic community and strong democracy at the national level by presenting three case studies of democratic communities. The democratic community was started at the grassroots level by rural people who are the majority of the country. The people in the community started to learn and exercise their rights to protect the natural resources and their way of life. As the people begin to socially engage in the community, they can reach further to the national level. The strengthening of the community and the people can then lead to political development in Thailand.

**Keywords:** Democratic Community/ People's Participation/ Social Engagement

### **Introduction**

Globalization is the wave that emerged from the development of information technology and cooperation among countries during a liberalization period. This wave has created changes to business, industry, public and agricultural sectors. Moreover, globalization has increased the level of economic development of the countries within the region. And it also led to the relocation of industrial activity into the agriculture sphere. This created resource allocation problems between local people and outside investors in various areas. People's politics have begun after people had risen up to call for rights to participate in the decision making process. Government exercised power only to satisfy business interests in expanding capitalism without caring about the impact to the disadvantages. Consequently, inadequacy of representative democracy has pushed people's movements in many countries including Thailand. Other hand, it is also a political necessity at the grassroots level if they would like to protect their legitimate rights and benefits. (Seksan Prasertkul, 2009 : 92-93)

People gather together to form groups at the grassroots level because they believe the exercise of State Power is not legitimate. They, therefore, group together

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with a large number of people to have enough power to negotiate with both the government and the business leaders. The way the people have formed into a group is actually according to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2550, section 66 and 67<sup>1</sup> which state that the people have the right to conserve traditional culture and also to participate in utilizing local natural resources. At the beginning, the people's movement at the community level may focus only on their own problems and benefits. Nonetheless, the democratic community is the starting point of sustainable political development at the national level as they start to be aware of social responsibility. The author shows the lessons learned from the three communities which considered being democratic.

### Democratic Community

Individual civic activity (participation) and the public association formed through civic activity (the community) call up two strikingly different worlds. The former is the world of autonomy, individualism, and agency; the latter is the world of sociability, community, and interaction. (Benjamin Barber, 2003 :155)

Community Organization is a method of community work originated in the 1940's in the United States; Community Organizations in the U.S found it helpful to distinguish their work from three other forms of community based strategies, namely advocacy, service delivery and community development. (Chuck Hirt, 2002: 59) The community organizations are the base of strong democracy in the United States Community as organizations are the mechanism for community members to take part in a variety of community activities.

Community organization is a combination of three things (chuck Hirt,2002: 59)

- 1) Building power through involving the constituency in identifying shared problems and the solutions to those problems they desire;
- 2) Identifying the people and structure that can make those solutions possible, enlisting those targets in the effort through negotiation, and using confrontation and pressure when needed; and
- 3) Building a community-based organization that is democratically controlled by a constituency can develop the capacity to take on further problems which embodies the will and the power of that constituency.

Democratic Community was defined as Grassroots engagement where people uncover, activate, and energize their community's own assets, take responsibility for their formal and informal decision-making process, and further their ability to work constructively with conflict and difference. (Peter Pennekamp and Anne Focke, 2013)

<sup>1</sup>After the Coup d'état in May 2014, The Constitution B.E 2550 had been replaced by the Temporary Constitution.



The democratic environment of the communities had made the people live with a democratic way of life. However, the democratic communities in the Thai context are usually the communities in which people still depend on natural resources for living their lives. One of the objectives of people rising up is to make changes in government decision making.

### **Democratic Community and Strong Democracy**

Political instability is a critical problem of democracy in Thailand as Thailand has experiences 18 interruptions of its democracy by the military. Corruption and misbehavior of politicians has been the excuse for the military to take control of the country. Thailand democracy therefore, sinks into the vicious cycle of recurring Coup D'état over many decades. The constitution has been redrafted repeatedly either to make the political system stronger or to improve a check and balance system; but the political instability remains. The focus, therefore, is upon the people as the root of the political system. As Gandhi said "People are the roots, the state is the fruit. If the roots are sweet, the fruits are bound to be sweet."

De Tocqueville explained that Democracy in the United States of America in 1831 to 1832 was created from bottom. During that period community had been the root of democracy in America. There was local autonomy, people's participation in public affairs and the relationship between local autonomy and active citizen. It can be concluded that in America local democracy precedes national democracy. (Thanes Chareonmuang, 2008:87-90 and Tocqueville, Alexis de, 2003)

Thanes Chareonmuang had compared democracy in the western countries with democracy in Thailand. The main factor which strengthened democracy in the Western Countries is that the democracy was started at the local level first before furthered to National Democracy. The stories in the Western were different from in the developing countries which lack of democracy development at the local level. Consequently, during the coup D'état when the parliament was dissolved, the constitution was torn apart; there is no protest from the localities.(Thanes Chareonmuang, 2008:87-90)

According to Anek Laothammatas (2002: 55-70) In the past, political intervention of army was judged as main problem of democracy in Thailand. The people, at that time, therefore, had come into the street to protest against an army and they had asked for democracy. Anyhow after less political intervention from army, especially after the Black May 1992 which is one of the political tragedies in Thailand, it seems like the army had tried to step away from politic. The spotlight, then, had been shifted from army to politicians and voters as the problems of



democracy. Up until now, Self-Government is the new approach to democracy. It is the approach that tries to change the people to become the citizen. It means the people are expected to be more responsible for the society and the public; and they should also have integrity, freedom, self-sufficient to solve the problems for the public.

Even in western countries, especially the United States which has been considered to be democratic prototype, regarding a study from Princeton University, using data from over 1,800 policy initiatives from 1981 to 2002, researchers Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page concluded that rich, well-connected individuals on the political scene now steer the direction of the country, regardless of, or even against the will of the majority of voters. American's political system has transformed from a democracy into an oligarchy, where power is wielded by wealth elites. (Ellen Brown, 2015) It is needed to engage the collective wisdom of people outside of government, rather than just relying. (Gavin Newsom and Lisa Dickey, 2013: xvi)

Actually the culture of democracy is a strong medium that ensures democracy's sustainability as much or more than political system can, and it thrives on the agency of citizens in their communities and neighborhood. (Peter Pennekamp and Anne Focke, 2013: 6)

In accordance with Creighton, public participate in the decision making process will benefit in different ways (2005: 18-19)

- 1) Improved quality of decisions
- 2) Minimizing cost and delay
- 3) Consensus Building
- 4) Avoiding worst-case confrontations
- 5) Maintaining credibility and legitimacy
- 6) Anticipating public concerns and attitudes
- 7) Developing civil society

According to Creighton, people's participations will be beneficial to decision making process of the State in various ways. At the community level, political participation can help the state to find a solution to the problem in time. As a result, there will be less conflict between the state and people in a community. Strong democracy is a democratic theory that advances the role of robust democratic citizenship over formal constitutional mechanisms, and is particularly attentive to civic participation, civic education, and a vibrant civil society. (Benjamin Barber, 2003) In strong democracy, people will have social awareness and sense of ownership to protect natural resources. Thai government believes that in order to strengthen the people, it needs to begin at the community level. The government, therefore, has tried to encourage people to participate in the decision making process



of the local government by supporting every community to set up community organizations. However, even thousands of communities were set up and affirmed by law, not many of them can be considered to be strong community.

### **Cases from Thai communities**

Notwithstanding, The communities that were selected to present here were the communities that were incorporated and succeeded in encouraging their members to participate in community activities by using their own resources in order to find out solutions for the communities. The term democratic community in this paper defines as the community with high level of social engagement of citizen at the grassroots level and also with self-determination. The first two cases that were selected to present here are communities that were set up after the community had confronted with the invaders while the last case is hill tribe community that originally created the self-management programme and regulations to protect their communities from any development scheme.

#### **1) Maerampueng Conservation Group**

Maerampueng Subdistrict, Bangsapan District, Prachaupkirikhan Province is a district with full of resources. There are wetland areas which would be affected from the construction of Steel Industry in which settled to the area. After forming in to group, the local people had learned that they have rights to protect the community resources from the invasion of the industry. For them, the forest is not just a resource, but it is their lives, as the forest has been insinuated as a supermarket for the people in the community for a long period of time.

In accordance with the determination of the economic development council, the heavy industry including the steel industry was promoted. As the demand increase, the steel industry put the effort to settle the steel factory down in Bangsapan District, as it is a good location for logistics. Consequently, the people realized that if the steel industry is situated in their community, the way of life of the people within the community would be changed. The fishermen will not be able to catch fish as they usually did. Finally, the community vocation as the fishermen will be disappeared.

As the people are aware of the importance of natural resources, they had begun to ask for their rights to participate in the decision making process after the area is intruded. The area of the forest is about 1,870 Square Rai and it is a place where the people had earned their lives from the benefit of utilizing the resources. These forest resources are also the origin of Mackerel which is the most important product of Bangsapan District. Vast lands close to the sea were bought up and turned



into fields of steel factories, completed with deep-water ports and roads. Initially, pleased to be part of the development, the locals later became aware of the environmental disadvantages and started boycotting new industrial facilities. (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/travel/When-the-neighbours-get-heavy-30183539.html>)

In 2006, the people in Bangsapan district started to organize a group after the owner of a small restaurant in the community was informed that the steel industry was coming into their community. He, therefore, started to inform other people in the community about this news. The group is extended after more people got this information. The members of the group came from various occupations such as fishermen, farmers, shopkeepers and small business owners. The people have an opportunity to exchange information and to delegate work during a meeting in every Saturday. Each member donated money to the group for the expenses. Some members were assigned to guard the forest because the investors of the Steel Industry tried to invade the forest area. As a result of the effort of the people, they have submitted a request for the cancellation of the land certificate which was issued by the Department of Land. Finally the people won and the land document was cancelled.

Maerampueng Conservation group have been working hard to find out necessary information to fight for their rights to protect the resources. Each member of the group was assigned a role play so that they have to find as much as information as they can, in order to predict the situation which might occurs in the future. The fighting of the group is based on the information and knowledge. They believed that media is a very important tool for acknowledge people, therefore they set up a community radio to exchange knowledge and information with the people in the community. They have been studied their rights and duties as a member of community and society, as the group wants the member to studied together to find out a best solution. Finally the National-Anti Corruption Commission (NACC) resolved to withdraw the Land Certificate which was issued illegally to the steel factory after the NACC received the petition from Maerampueng Conservation group. ([http://www.khaosod.co.th/view\\_newsonline.php?newsid=TVRReU1qazBPRGs0TXc9PQ==](http://www.khaosod.co.th/view_newsonline.php?newsid=TVRReU1qazBPRGs0TXc9PQ==))

We have learned that Maerampueng Conservation group was created from the awareness and consciousness of the people within the community. As the way of lives of the people are depended on the natural resources, therefore the member put all of their efforts for the protest in order to protect their lives and sustain the resources.





## 2) Khao Kooha Community Right School

Khao Kooha had been the origin of culture and wisdom of a community before the governor announced the rocky mountain to be stone resource for the industry in 1997 and the patent permit had been given to the owner of stone explosion industry during 1999-2009.

Consequently, the people in Kooha Mountain Area, Rattapoom District, Songkhla Province grouped together, after they were effected from the stone explosion of the Stone Explosion Industry. Most of the people in this area are the poultry farmers. The vibration of stone explosion causes their houses to be cracked and its noise also causes the duck not to deliver the eggs. They started to find out the way to stop the industry and finally found that the present constitution gives them rights to participate in the natural resource allocation of the community. Once they were aware of their rights and began to talk and exchange information and ideas, they had been studied related laws seriously especially the Information Act B.E.2540<sup>2</sup> which gives them right to access official information from any state agencies.

Khooha Community Organization Council was set up according to the Community Organization Council Act 2008, as this act promotes the people to have an open forum to discuss and to participate in the public policy decision making process. The community organization council South Khooka had created the public space for the consultation and deliberation. The people in South Khooka Sub district and surrounding areas have grouped together and had created a knowledge and information sharing method by setting up a Community Right School to be the knowledge centre for the community. This group had used the mechanism of Community Organization Council for their operation.

At the school, the community members become the students. The students are really eager to learn about their rights and what will happen to their lives and community. They had been organized public forum for giving an opportunity to stakeholders in the community to express their demands and giving suggestions to propose to the local government. Moreover, the injured people had submitted a petition to the prime minister for restraining the patent permit of the stone explosion industry. In the petition, they stated about 1) the damage of the houses 2) the impacts on peoples' belongings 3) the impacts on health, mind and soul. 3) the impacts on

<sup>2</sup> According to this Act, section 4 "official information" means information in possession or control of a State agency, whether it is the information relating to the operation of the State or the information relating to a private individual;

"State agency" means a central administration, provincial administration, local administration, State enterprise, Government agency attached to the National Assembly, Court only in respect of the affairs unassociated with the trial and adjudication of cases, professional supervisory organization, independent agency of the State and such other agency as prescribed in the Ministerial Regulation;



their career 4) the impacts on the natural resources and the environment. They had also asked for a restudy of the EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment).

Khooha Community Right School is the beginning of the people in South Khooka Community and surrounding areas to know and to exercise their rights. They had learned to take part in the decision making process of the officials with authorities as they realized that the stone explosion could have an impact to their lives and communities. Finally, they became active members of the democratic society at the sub district level.

### **3) Maegi Sub district, Kunyuam District, Maehongson Province**

Maegi sub district is the smallest sub district in Khunyuam District. Ninety percent of the people are the Karen Hill Tribe and all of them are Christian. Most of the people work as farmers, anyway, their products which are garlic and soy is not for sell but only for household consumption. As they follow sufficiency economy philosophy of the king, they rarely spend money. They usually consume what are produced within the community. Nevertheless, after they are affected by many external factors, Maegi community started the self-management programme in 1994.

A village headman from each village is responsible to call the villagers for a meeting. The sub-district regulations were legislated from this meeting. The meeting of the community is organized regularly every Sunday at the church after the pray. Moreover, every month the president of sub district and village heads will call for a formal meeting of people. The regulations were aimed to shape the behaviors of the villagers. One section of the regulations was to protect natural resources from the invaders, either the community's member or the people in nearby communities. These regulations have been approved by the community members who had participated in the meeting.

Consequently, the community is free from drug and crime as every member cooperates together to improves the quality of life of the people in the community. The leaders from every village in the sub district can work together harmonically. The philosophy of the community is that “before we ask for the right, we have to think of the duty.” In the decision making process, the group decisions are depended on the deliberation and consensus of the group. As such, the people also built networking relationship with the officials and the administrators.

Maegi is a good example of a community that every member had tried to participate in the management of their own resources. The people do not ask for help and support from the people with authorities but they start to help themselves first. They not only think about their rights but they also concern about their duties.





	<b>Mae Gi, Mae Hong Son Province</b>	<b>Maerampueng Conservation Group</b>	<b>KhaoKooha Community Right School</b>
Characteristics of people in community	-hill tribe (Karen) People -Christian -farmers	-fishermen -small business owner	-farmers -small business owner
Originate of the group	Embodied naturally and affirmed by the Community Organization Council Act 2008	To confront with the invaders by exercising their right according to related laws.	Embodied according to the Community Organization Council Act 2008 to exercise their right to protect their way of life
Community strategies	- self-mangement programme - community regulations - networking	-information sharing and role play -radio broadcast -networking	-knowledge information sharing -networking
Community organization Resources	-leaders -community members	-leaders -community members -donation from members -external contribution	-leaders -community members -external contribution
Outcome	Community norm and culture to protect natural resources and their way of life	Land Certificate which was issued illegally to the steel factory was withdrawn	The patent permit for stone explosion was not renewed.

The table summarized the characteristics, originate, strategies, resources and outcomes of the three communities. Even each community is different in terms of either problems or strategies. All of them have the same mutual characteristic which is sense of ownership to the community. They therefore, worked hard and finally, these three communities came up with good outcome.



## Conclusion

People's participation is one of the channels for the people to exercise their rights. The success of the democratic community, at first, came from the awareness of people in the community. This is the democracy at the sub district level of the grassroots people which is the starting points for people to learn democracy. It is a civic education in practice which can lead to the political stabilization and good governance at the local level first and will further to the national level consequently.

Even at present, after Coup D'état, the political situation in Thailand is considered to be undemocratic, at the sub district level, it is in the opposite direction, as the democracy at the grassroots level is still growing and also be strengthened. The people at the grassroots level exercise their rights to protect natural resources and their communities, solving their own problems and managing the communities without asking for any help or intervention of government officials or the local politicians. The achievement of these 3 case studies came from the people empowerment of the community itself. The democracy of the grassroots is the foundation of the democracy at the national level. The people who have high level of political participation are not easily dominated by the local elites, the local politicians or the government officials, and they will be free from the patronage system. The people power will be increased while the power of the state was decreased. Finally, vote buying will not be a success strategy for the political parties and politicians in Thailand anymore. The political party will have to change its' strategy to try to motivate people to vote for them by proposing attractive policies. Not only a result of the election result that will be changed but the behavior of the politicians will also be improved. As more people participate in the public policy decision-making process, it might be difficult for either politicians or civil servants to misbehave or corrupt as some of them usually did. The tendency of Coup D'état will also be reduced as the people are strong enough to protect their rights and their constitution. They also are strong enough to kick their representatives out of offices if the miss behave or corruption cases were found. The patronage system which encourages the government officials and the politicians to corrupt will also be eliminated. Even the democratic community was started from the rural people at the grassroots level who are the majority of the country. The strengthening of the community and the people can lead to the political development in Thailand as a member of ASEAN Community and a member of the world society.



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