

# Coping Mechanisms of Child Development Centers for Service Delivery in the Insurgency Area in Three Southernmost Provinces of Thailand\*



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## Abstract

Insurgency in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand threatens child development centers and creates challenges in service delivery. This article examines the coping mechanisms of three centers by focusing on their core elements of service delivery. The qualitative approach was applied by interviewing three directors and six caregivers, selected purposively based on their duty as formal leaders and insiders of the centers. The coping mechanisms adapted by these child development centers consisted of 28 techniques. Ten strategies to cope with the element of potential of staff included creating and instilling proper behavior, adjusting behavior, organizing on-site trainings, conducting trainings with networks, supporting staff in attending trainings elsewhere, helping staff for further education, communicating for morale support, encouraging self-motivation, providing rewards, and assigning proper and meaningful responsibility. Nine strategies to deal with the element of quality of learning and care consisted of increasing intensive care for children, providing activities to support children's development, educating children on self-protection, organizing meetings for relevant parties, concentrating on the safety of children and staff, informing parents about services, informing parents about children's security, creating good interactions,

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and building customers' trust in quality care. Nine strategies to handle the element of customer focus were explaining restrictions during insurgency, arranging parent-teacher meetings, increasing fact-to-face interactions, maximizing IT capacities, applying public relations, sharing knowledge and experiences among caregivers and customers, visiting children's families, communicating through documentary method, and providing activities for parents to participate. This paper suggests that the supervisors should win the hearts and minds of staffs and develop strong collaboration with networks. The administrators and staff members themselves should seek more knowledge and skills concerning self-protection in the context of insurgency before passing them on to children. Moreover, there should be an assignment of a particular person to be responsible for social media interactions.

**Keywords:** Coping mechanisms; Service delivery; Child Development Centers; Insurgency; three Southernmost Provinces of Thailand



## Introduction

The services provided by child development centers are significant to the growth of individuals and the nation (Keiningham, Aksoy, Andreassen, & Estrin, 2006). A number of scholars confirm that the services that child development centers deliver to children at early age have powerful effects on their development (Iram & Butt, 2004; Doherty, Forer, Lero, Goelman & LaGrange, 2006; Liu, Yeung & Farmer, 2001; Champbell-Barr & Garnham, 2010). Child development centers in Thailand are regarded as public service agencies operated by the Educational Division of each local government authority under the control of Department of Local Administration. Like any organization, these centers have some problems of their kind. However, for the child development centers in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand including Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat, where insurgencies take place frequently (McCargo, 2014), common daily provision of services became a challenge (Krueathep, 2015).

Insurgency has negative influences on people in the area in many forms (Chaijaroenwatana, 2017). The most recent report reveals that the attacks caused 11,919 injuries and 6,543 deaths (Jitpiromsri & Panasnashe, 2015). The record shows that there were 327 arson attacks on educational organizations which included child development centers (Human Right Watch, 2010). These incidents are considered the most threatening obstacles to service delivery of public organizations including child development centers (Pimpa, 2008). Furthermore, the statistics revealed by the Regional Education Office No.12 (2014) indicate that the approximate numbers of deaths, injuries, and property damages of educational employees as well as those working with government organizations were 170, 160, and 60, respectively.

The insurgency in the Deep South disrupts service delivery of child development centers in many ways. To start with, it interrupts teaching procedure of caregivers. Many child development centers have decided to stop their operation and close after the insurgent attacks on public employees or public organizations, especially on educational agencies. It reduces the operational days of child development centers (Human Right Watch 2010; Dina, 2010). The insurgency in the area also prevents child development centers from following their usual patterns in learning activities. Next, it creates difficulties in motivating staff to deliver services in the area. (Human Right Watch, 2010; Pimpa, 2008). The challenges caused by the insurgency have attracted researchers to study intensively how these child development centers cope with their problems.

Prior to investigating deeply the strategies that child development centers in the insurgency area applied to deliver services to the clients, it is crucial to clarify the core elements of service delivery of child development centers which various scholars have proposed. There are many elements of service delivery of child development center. However, the three core elements to which many studies refer compose of potential of staffs, quality of learning and care, and customer focus. These main elements of service delivery of child development centers are illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1** Core elements of service delivery of child development centers

Core elements	Description	Sources
Potential of staff	Staff having appropriate behavior, adequate skills and knowledge in delivering services to customers, and having motivation to work in the area	Ciulla, Jennifer, Doris & Jennifer, 2002; Armon, Berry, Duncan, Calder, Clapham & Harvey, 2004; Devkota, 2005; Upreti & Sony, 2014; OEDC, 2008; Smith, 2009; O’Malley, 2010
Quality of learning and care	Learning and care activities grounded on knowledge, customers’ trust, and acceptance of services delivered by service providers	Isabella Plains Early Childhood School, 2016; Bathurst Family Support Service, 2012; Australian Government, 2008
Customer focus	Customers are the main concern of service providers based on customers’ voices and feedbacks as well as interactions with center staff	National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2015; World Health Organization, 2006; Ciulla, Jennifer, Doris & Jennifer, 2002; Isabella Plains Early Childhood School, 2016; Bathurst Family Support Service, 2012

This study attempted to investigate the coping mechanisms of child development centers in delivering services to the customers in the insurgency area by concentrating on the core elements of service delivery of child development centers. The results from this study provide information about the main strategies that child development centers utilized in delivering services to customers in the insurgency area.

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed qualitative approach to investigate the coping mechanisms of child development centers under the operation of selected municipalities in the three southernmost provinces of Thailand in delivering services to customers in the insurgency area. The reason for choosing this approach is that the topic of coping mechanism in delivering services in this insurgency area had never been studied. As Creswell (2014) recommends, a qualitative research is appropriate and helpful for special research problems and research questions which have never been addressed by a particular researcher.

The locations of the research were child development centers in selected municipalities in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat provinces. The selected sites consisted of Taluban, Betong, and Takbai Municipalities. First of all, they were selected purposively due to their geographical, economic, and socio-political diversity. Secondly, the three municipalities are situated in the zone where insurgencies take place frequently (Future Urban Development, 2014). Third, all selected municipalities are multi-cultural societies in which residents comprised of Malay, Thai, and Chinese (Future Urban Development, 2014).

This study focused on a small number of samples in order to gain insightful understanding of the research problems (O’Leary, 2014). The respondents of this research derived from purposive sampling method by selecting nine key informants consisting of three directors and six caregivers. They were considered formal leaders and insiders of the child development centers because they played active roles and had first-hand knowledge and experience about life at the centers to share with the researchers.

The study employed the researchers’ developed interview guide as its research instrument. It consisted of two parts of questions. The first part for asking key informants about demographic information included six questions about sex, age,

religions, education, current position and working experiences related to child development centers. The second part for asking key informants concerning coping mechanisms of the centers comprised of 12 main questions covering three core components of service delivery of child development centers.

The researchers conducted a pilot study before taking actual key informant interviews to test research tools and data collection procedure. The actual data collection process was conducted from December 2016 to January 2017. Both in the pilot study and actual data collection procedure, key informant interviews were utilized. This kind of interviews supplied data and understanding related to the questions (ACAPS, 2011) and reveal confidential information which other techniques cannot provide (Kumar, 1989). Content analysis was used to categorize data gained from respondents into themes and subthemes to understand and interpret the interviewees' responses.

## Results

The information gathered from the interviews shows that demographically most of the key informants were female. More than half were between 40-49 years old. The majority of key informants believed in Islam. Most of the key informants obtained a bachelor's degree in early childhood education while the rest gained a master's degree in education administration. In terms of position, most were caregivers. As for working experiences related to child development centers, the majority of key informants had between six to ten years of experience.

The responses from key informants pertaining to the coping mechanisms of child development centers in service delivery in the insurgency area can be grouped into three core components which are potential of staff, quality of learning and care, and customer focus as illustrated in Table 2 below.



**Table 2** Coping mechanisms of child development centers in delivering services to clients

Core elements	Themes	Coping mechanisms
<b>Potential of staff</b>	Behavior of staff	<p>Creating and instilling proper behavior of staff</p> <p>Adjusting behavior of staff for security reason such as going to work in groups, avoiding wearing uniforms, commuting in four-wheel vehicles</p>
	Knowledge and skills of staff	<p>Organizing training programs at child development centers</p> <p>Allowing staff to attend training programs elsewhere</p> <p>Conducting training programs with networks</p> <p>Providing opportunities for staff to continue their study</p>
	Motivation of staff	<p>Communicating to motivate staff</p> <p>Encouraging self-motivation</p> <p>Providing rewards for staff such as fieldtrips, gifts, organizing award events</p> <p>Assigning suitable and meaningful responsibilities</p>
<b>Quality of learning and care</b>	Process of providing care for children	<p>Increasing intensive care for children such as using hugging technique, telling story to divert attention from insurgency</p> <p>Educating children on self-protection in the insurgency context</p>
	Learning activities and learning process	<p>Organizing meetings for relevant parties to comment and putting forward ideas about learning activities and learning process</p>

Core elements	Themes	Coping mechanisms
		Focusing on activities to support development of children
		Paying attention to the safety of staffs and children in order to manage learning activities and learning process
	Trust and acceptance of customers about service delivery	Giving information to parents about services provided by child development centers Informing parents about safety of children Constructing good interactions with parents Delivering quality care for children
<b>Customer focus</b>	Responses to requirements and feedbacks from parents	Explaining to parents about restrictions on service delivery of child development centers due to insurgency Arranging parent-teacher meetings as a channel for obtaining information related to problems, requirements, and suggestions
	Interactions between child development centers and parents	Holding face-to-face meetings with parents Communicating with parents through telephone and social media Utilizing public relation approach to interact with parents Sharing knowledge and experiences among caregivers and customers Visiting children's families Using documentary approach such as mailing, creating a behavior report book to inform parents about behavior of children, announcing important information on the child development centers' boards Providing activities for parents to participate at child development centers

Table 2 identifies the 28 distinct strategies that child development centers in the insurgency area employed in delivering services to their clients with relation to three core components of service delivery for child development centers. Ten strategies were used to cope with the elements of potential of staffs while nine strategies were employed to deal with the components concerning quality of learning and care and nine other techniques were utilized for the element of customer focus.

## Discussion

The study revealed 28 main strategies that the child development centers in the insurgency area utilized in coping with obstacles in delivering services to clients. They raised various issues that required discussion.

### **Coping mechanisms in relation to potential of staff**

Regarding the element of the potential of staff, the study focused on the issues of staff's behavior, knowledge and skills, as well as motivation. The study found that child development centers coped with behavior of staff in order to deliver best services to the customer by generating and instilling proper behavior among staff members. This strategy conforms to the study by Otubu (2011) which states that instilling good behavior among staff in order to deliver services can lead to excellent service delivery. The other approach that child development centers employed for dealing with staff's behavior was to adjust their behavior such as to go to work with groups of colleagues and to avoid wearing uniforms for the sake of security. This technique of going to work in groups is contrary to the evidence disclosed by Devkota (2005) that staff of service provider organizations in the Nepali insurgency area avoided moving in the area in groups in order not to be a target of insurgents. However, because the majority of staff at child development centers in southernmost provinces were mostly women, they felt safer when there were many people going alongside with them. Their technique in avoidance of wearing uniforms is in accordance with the technique utilized by the army, police, or paramilitary forces in the area of Chandigarh, India, so as to prevent attacks from insurgents in the area (The Time of India, 2016).

The mechanisms for coping with the knowledge and skills of staff at child development centers concentrated on supports for staffs to attend trainings organized by the centers themselves, by other related organizations, or by collaborating networks.

The staffs themselves also viewed that it was useful and valuable to improve their knowledge and skills, so they were enthusiastic even to journey in the insurgency area sometimes. Interestingly, the studied revealed that child development centers utilized networking as well in organizing some training programs. Due to the fact that it was difficult to invite experts in the field of service delivery at child development centers from central or other parts of Thailand for fear of insurgency, using networks in organizing programs for staff seems to be more proper. This tactic agrees with the suggestion of Isokpan & Durojaye (2016) that service providers in the insurgency area should seek support and cooperation from their networks. Moreover, the three centers urged their staffs to get higher education. All these mechanisms conform with many studies which proved that appropriate and adequate training programs as well as specialized training programs allow staff to improve their knowledge and skills in delivering service to the customers (Chi, Bulange, Urda & Sundby, 2015; Devkota, 2005; International Save the Children Alliance, 2008; Marrogi, Tarantino & Caslen 2015; O'Malley, 2010; Otubu, 2011; Rose & Greeley, 2006; Yerima & Singh, 2017). Still more recent methods have been offered. Various scholars have proposed that for more successful service delivery the child development centers in the insurgency area should pay attention to other aspects of staff members as well. For example, Marrogi, Tarantino & Caslen (2015) recommend that service providers should select staffs who meet the qualifications in understanding the culture, history, and psychology of people in the area. In fact, the selection process at the Thai child development centers might have already taken this factor into consideration, but following this recommendation, they may do it more systematically in the future.

This research found that child development centers in the insurgency area dealt with motivation of staffs by communicating to motivate for their morale and job performance. For example, the executives of municipalities and child development centers talked with staffs sincerely and gently as family members and referred to religious principles to motivate them in delivering services. These treatments helped them to feel that they were essential components of the organization. It is necessary that leaders of staffs in the insurgency area recognize that their team members can be particularly sensitive and need positive communication. O'Meally, Hogg & Di John (2017) confirm that leaders play a vital role in motivating staffs to deliver services in the context of insurgency. Moreover, the study disclosed that the child development centers employed the technique of self-motivation by encouraging staff to empower

their mind in order to confront unexpected conditions as well as in working in the insurgency area effectively. These techniques were in accordance with the approach of resilience quotient which Sucaromana (2016) considered a mental and emotional power that is useful for everyone to apply when facing critical conditions. This is due to the fact that those who can overcome difficult situations through their potential will be able to live in society as well as working in organizations happily and have motivation to generate meaningful and valuable outputs. Another important method that the child development centers employed in motivating staff is rewarding staffs such as arranging fieldtrips for them, presenting gifts on special occasions, and organizing award events. These techniques of rewarding staff correspond with the study conducted by Otubu (2011) and Zivetz (2006). Furthermore, child development centers in the insurgency area used the approach of assigning appropriate and meaningful duty to staff members in order to motivate them for satisfactory service delivery. This concurs with the statement of the International Save the Children Alliance (2008) that assigning proper duty to staff can generate positive values and commitments. It can be interpreted from the results of this research that powerful approaches to motivate staff for productive service delivery in the insurgency area is generally based on winning both hearts and minds of operating staffs. The study undertaken by Yerima & Singh (2017) can support this analysis.

### **Coping mechanisms in relation to the quality of learning and care**

The element concerning quality of learning and care includes the issues of process of providing care for children, managing leaning activities and process, and building trust and acceptance of customers about service delivery. The study revealed that child development center in the insurgency area dealt with the process of providing care for children by increasing intensive care for children through the use of hugging technique to relieve children's fear in the insurgency situation and the technique of telling story to divert their attention. It is crucial for staff of child development centers to observe closely the emotion of children in the insurgency situation and deal with it properly. Moreover, the child development centers in this area managed the process of providing care for children by educating children about self-protection during insurgency situation. This conforms to the study of Akintunde & Selzing-Musa (2016) which reveals that caregivers in the insurgency area have to teach children about the technique to protect themselves. Indeed, it is important for child development centers in the area to urge children about the self-protection and teach them safety techniques.

This research found that the child development centers under investigation coped with learning activities and learning process by organizing meeting sessions for relevant parties such as inviting parents, community representatives, and committees of child development centers to comment and put forward ideas about learning activities and learning process of the centers. This strategy concurred with many studies which confirm that service providers require suggestions and supports from all shareholders as well as communities in order to provide needed services to the customers in the insurgency area (International Save the Children Alliance, 2008; Rose & Greeley, 2006; O’Malley, 2010; O’Meally, Hogg & Di John, 2017; Otubu, 2011). Furthermore, these child development centers dealt with learning activities and learning process by focusing on the activities that support the development of children by providing opportunities for parents to participate in providing learning activities to children such as playing a role of storyteller. It is interesting that key informants asserted that these techniques were helpful and successful in the development of children in the insurgency situation. The reason is that children could learn from different people, not just from caregivers. The studies undertaken by International Save the Children Alliance (2008) and Wright & Smith (2014) suggest that child service providers should provide chances for parents to involve in the learning process of their children. Moreover, the child development centers in the afflicted Southern Thailand also utilized the approach of paying special attention to the safety of staff and children in order to manage learning activities and learning process effectively. Some centers hired security guards to assure the safety of staff and children during operational time. As Isokpan & Durojaye (2016) suggest, it is crucial to provide sufficient security guards for protection of children and staff. The other solution that these child development centers used for concentration on the security of children and staff was to limit the leaning activities to the compound of the centers. The study of Seddon & Hussein (2002) reveals that service providers in an insurgency area usually avoid unnecessary movement outside centers for security reason.

The strategies employed by the three child development centers in order to generate trust and acceptance of customers about service delivery comprised of giving parents information about available services, informing parents about the safety of children, developing good interactions with parents, and delivering quality care for children. These child development centers in the insurgency area also concentrated on the ways of communicating with parents to report essential information related to the intended services. All these were to construct parents’ trust and acceptance of the

delivered services. These practices agreed with the principles of Termtawewut (2017) who stresses that attention to supplying important information to customers leads to their trust and acceptance of the services.

### **Coping mechanisms in relation to customer focus**

This element concentrates on the issues of responses to the requirements and feedbacks from parents and interactions between child development centers and parents. The most interesting strategy that the child development centers under study used in coping with parents' requirements and feedbacks was arranging parent-teacher meetings to serve as a channel for obtaining and responding to the information related to problems and needs in the insurgency context. As Lambert (2011) convinces, a parent-teacher meeting provides a great opportunity for parents to voice opinions and problems related to their children. At the same time, teachers can have a chance to clarify, discuss and inform on the issues concerning their services.

The present research revealed many techniques employed by the child development centers in developing interaction with parents as well as the techniques in using social media such as Facebook and Line application in order to communicate with parents. These methods were in accordance with those found in the study of Termtawewut (2017), who reports that many local government organizations have provided a channel for customers to interact with service providers through social media. However, while their users were faced with the problems of delayed responses, the staffs of the three child development centers did not seem to receive any complaint.

## **Recommendations**

This study found that particularly in the insurgency area winning both hearts and minds of staffs is a powerful approach to motivate them in service delivery. Therefore, these child development centers, especially the persons in superior positions, should pay attention to positive communication. They should also assign meaningful and suitable duty to the right persons. As the use of networks of child development centers in arranging training sessions for staff is a proper way in the insurgency situation, the child development centers need to focus more on developing and maintaining strong collaboration with networks in order to construct efficient training programs for staff.

The results showed that it is essential for child development centers in the area to educate children about self-protection. Thus, training of safety techniques for children is required. However, prior to teaching children, the administrators and staff members need to learn first about survival techniques in order to pass on proper knowledge to children under their care. In addition, the study revealed that the child development centers utilized social media in order to keep interactions with parents. It is crucial to note that these child development centers should plan to assign staff members to be particularly responsible for interactions with parents through social media to avoid such problems of delayed responses as found in the communication with some local government organizations (Termtawewut, 2017).

This study is limited to the investigation of the coping mechanisms of child development centers in delivering services to customers in Southern Thailand insurgency area. Further study should focus on coping mechanisms of other levels of educational service organizations such as primary schools, secondary schools, as well as tertiary institutions in the area. Moreover, other public service organizations such as hospitals should also be examined with regards to coping mechanisms in delivering services to customers.

## Conclusion

This article explored the coping mechanisms of the child development centers in delivering services to customers in the insurgency area of Thailand by focusing on the three core elements of service delivery of child development centers which included potential of staff, quality of learning and care, and customer focus. Evidently, the key informants' responses reflected that both the administrators and the staffs were well cooperative in their attempts to improve services through self-improvement and collaboration with networks. In summary, the three child development centers under study could effectively cope with problems in delivering services to customers through 28 distinct strategies: ten to deal with potential of staff, nine to cope with the quality of learning and care, and nine to handle with customer focus issues.

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