

## **The Paradox of Community Development: Lessons from the Promotion of Community Participation in Thailand**

Thorn PITIDOL

Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford

In the present context of the welfare state retrenchment in developed countries, and the growing discontent with representative democracy in developing countries, communities are frequently looked upon as the alternative means to substitute for, or to complement, the roles of the state. A number of social innovations have been introduced to promote the roles of communities in welfare and governance, ranging from the Big Society in the UK and the Village's Council in India, to the case study of this paper – the Council of Community Organisations (CCO) programme in Thailand. These innovations aim to reconstruct public spheres by encouraging communities to step up and take on the roles of providing public goods and monitoring the government's affairs. Based on the examination of the experiences from the CCO programme in Thailand, this paper warns against a number of assumptions that are usually associated with these efforts in community development. The paper argues that the perception of a community as a harmonious and autonomous social unit, although making community development an attractive social development approach, tends to also make it ineffective in achieving desired social outcomes.

The paper formulates this argument from conducting an institutional analysis of Thailand's CCO programme. The CCO programme, a social innovation recently introduced in Thailand in 2008, aims to promote community participation in development and governance by establishing a council of community representatives at the local level. Similar to many other efforts at promoting community development, the CCO programme was established through a favourable perception of a community as a harmonious social unit, endowed with social capital that helps members engage in collective activities. Moreover, associated with this perception is also the assumption of a community as an autonomous social system, separate from the state. The paper examines how rules in promoting community participation based on such a perception actually work in the real context. It does so through investigating how the rules of the CCO programme interact with different types of local conditions in Thailand, and how such interactions affect the capacity of the programme in achieving community participation.

The paper finds the CCO programme to be ineffective in promoting community participation, both in development activities and in monitoring local government affairs. This ineffectiveness is rooted in the way the programme's rules fail to engage productively with the complexity of actual conditions at the local level. The main features of such complexity are the integration between communities and the state, and the inequality within communities. Contrary to the aforementioned

perception that is usually associated with community development, communities and the state are rarely separate and isolated, and the state's power and resources actually play a crucial role in enabling a successful promotion of community participation. Moreover, most communities are endowed with the inequality between its members, making it difficult for community development to avoid being captured by local elites. Without the recognition of these complexities, and the explicit attempt to engage with them, successes in community development are likely to be elusive.