Promoting waste separation for recycling and local governance in Thailand

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Abstract

It is often assumed that waste separation at source can be had 'on order' by developing country city authorities simply through a donor-driven project, without thorough consideration of the significance of distinct socio-political contexts commonly encountered in Third World societies that immensely vary with those found in mature liberal democracies. Through a qualitative research method using a case of failed public participation in waste separation project in Hatyai City in southern Thailand, the paper examines the opportunity structures for participation and development of civic culture among local citizens, focusing in three areas: the state of civil society organizations in Hatyai, style of public administration, and attributes of local officials and community politics. Three interrelated and mutually reinforcing major determinants of lack of civic culture and publicly tested opportunity structures for participation were identified: (1) dearth and weakness of autonomous civil society organizations; (2) dominance of traditional top-down and non-participatory style of administration by the municipal authority; and (3) the deep-rootedness of patron–client relations between local government officials and community people. Separately and in combination, these factors undermined the development of heightened environmental awareness and public education, and the generation of a sense of co-production and partnership in the waste separation project that have been proven to be the determinants of most success cases in developed country cities. It is further argued that when pursued as a project in Third World cities, waste separation at source may have to build into its conceptualization, design and implementation

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process important mechanisms that will deliberately promote salient local governance reforms in order to enhance its chance of success.
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Introduction

There is no doubt that waste recycling based on waste separation at source has been fairly successful in developed country cities. It is now being widely promoted in developing country cities as essential component of non-end-of-pipe and long-term solution to their burgeoning solid waste problem. It is often assumed that waste separation can be had ‘on order’ by developing country city authorities simply through a donor-driven project, without thorough consideration of the country’s particular socio-political circumstances and tradition. This assumption needs close scrutiny since studies of successful recycling programs in developed country cities point to specific socio-political contexts and instruments of public action that have long existed or are easily realizable in their mature liberal democratic systems. Absence of careful analysis of distinct contexts might spell doom to sustainable development projects due to unanticipated external constraints (Dahiya & Pugh, 2000; Pugh, 2000; Carreon, 2002).

Many studies in North American cities and other developed country cities have identified wide and sustained involvement of citizens in recycling programs as fundamental factor to success. This has been propelled by two inter-related factors: heightened environmental awareness and public education, and co-production or partnerships in the recycling program (Folz, 1999, 1991; Taylor, 1999; Lober, 1996; Tchobanoglous, Theusen, & Vigil, 1993; Ward & Gleiber, 1993; Powelson & Powelson, 1992; Anderson & Burnham, 1992). In turn, development of these factors implies two important favorable conditions: (a) the existence of an adequate civic culture or awareness;¹ and, (b) fairly developed opportunity structures for participation and whose utilization by citizens has been producing unequivocal results about the efficacy of participation (Dotcherty, Goodlad, & Paddison, 2001; Brinkerhoff, 2000). Similar to other development projects, a collaborationist and synergistic relationship between civil society and the state, therefore, is seen as ideal socio-political context for high and widespread success of recycling and waste separation projects involving people’s participation (See, for example, Stren, 2001; Granada, 2001; Velasquez, 1999; Carley, 2001; Evans, 2002).

However, more often than not, adequate civic culture and publicly tested opportunity structures for participation do not exist in developing countries and their cities. This is due to the pervasive nature of domination by traditional elite and anti-development oligarchs who both oppose people empowerment and stand in the way of political equality and participation in these

¹We refer to civic culture or awareness here as that “psychological attitudes among citizens that support the development of an active role for them in governance and create substantial consensus on the legitimacy of political institutions and the direction and content of public policy, a widespread tolerance of a plurality of interests and belief in their reconcilability, and a widely distributed sense of political competence and trust in the citizenry” (Almond, 1980 in Dotcherty et al., 2001).
countries’ political system. Literature highlights their dominant socio-political landscapes as characterized by institutional developments that are closely bound with securing support mainly through patronage, clientelism, and traditional affiliations, rather than mobilizing people with common socio-economic status and enhancement of democracy for developmental goals (Smith, 2003; Callahan, 1998; Leftwich, 1993; particular for South East Asian (SEA) developing societies see Case, 2002; McCargo, 1998). Generally speaking, there is also no proper balance between state and civil society, which should function to monitor and check the abuse of the exercise of state power on the one hand, and stimulate political participation and educate people in civic culture on the other. The latter is worsened by lack of plurality of genuinely autonomous organizations (i.e., vis-à-vis the state) and these states’ unwillingness to cede space to civic groups (Smith, 2003; Leftwich, 1993; particular for SEA developing societies see Yamamoto, 1995; Bierling & Lafferty, 1998). Literature on the present-day socio-political landscape of Thailand, a middle-level developing country, highlights more or less similar key features. (These features will be discussed in pertinent parts of this paper later.)

Since studies have unequivocally pointed out that high and widespread success of program of recycling based on waste separation at source in North countries is dependent on civic culture and publicly tested opportunity structures for participation that are characteristics of mature liberal democracies, it may be that absence or lack of these factors in low-quality or unconsolidated democracies in developing countries will seriously jeopardize the chance of positive outcome of the program in these places. This paper explores the validity of this deductive reasoning through a case study of a Canadian-funded project promoting waste separation for recycling in a municipality city in southern Thailand. Its purpose is to find empirical support to this deductively derived main hypothesis in a study primarily using qualitative research methods. Thus, this case study is both explanatory and illustrative (Hammersly & Gomm, 2000): it attempts to explain a particular occurrence of failure in public participation in a waste separation project, and to illustrate as well how our hypothesis may operate in given situation. Our general aim is to analyze and understand the significance of distinct socio-political contexts often encountered in Third World societies and their implications on transferring approaches of sustainable development successfully tested and popularized in developed country cities under a different set of conditions.

Methodology

This case study principally employs qualitative research methods in seeking causal explanations to a low participation that occurred in the pilot waste separation project in Hatyai municipality and corroborate the aforementioned hypothesis. It builds on an earlier survey study of public participation on the same project and sites (Suwanna, 2002) by exploring the causalities and conditions of the phenomenon. The authors of this paper have drawn their conclusions on participation failure through analysis of qualitative data gathered through key informant individual interviews, focused group interviews, participant observation, documentary research, and through the use of theoretical insights from recent literature on developing countries’ socio-politics and state in general and of Thailand in particular.
Unstructured individual and group interviews were conducted among a total of 41 informants in Hatyai: 11 personalities from the business and trade groups, civic associations and university faculties; three elected municipal officials (a former and the incumbent mayors, and a deputy mayor); 10 administrative and operational staff of various municipal line agencies (e.g., Cleaning Service Section, Sanitation and Environmental Bureau, Social Welfare Division, Public Relations Section); one from the International Center for Sustainable Cities (ICSC); two community leaders; and 14 committee members and ordinary residents. These interviews were carried out between January 2002 and May 2003. In addition, one of the authors attended and observed community meetings of municipal officials with residents and municipality-level meetings of key participants in the project during the same period.

Background of the waste separation project in Hatyai Municipality

As an entry point into a discussion of circumstances and constraints to public involvement and participation, a profile of the waste separation project is presented. Relevant descriptions in this regard are the location of the project, highlights of the launching waste separation project, and quantitative evaluation of participation.

Location

Hatyai is the fifth largest city in Thailand. Located in Songkhla Province near the Thai-Malaysian border, it serves as the economic and commercial center of southern Thailand and also a favorite tourism destination for Malaysian and Singaporean visitors. It can be reached from Bangkok through 945 km of railway and about 1125 km of highway. Hatyai has a total population of 156,941, with an average density of 7500 per km². This rises to 20,000 per km² at the city’s central business district (Hatyai Municipality, 2002).

Reflecting a general trend in Thailand, solid waste management has become an increasing problem also in Hatyai City in recent years. The city’s waste had increased from 210.7 ton in 1997 to 240.2 ton per day in 2001. In year 2003, the average rate of waste generation was estimated to be 1.4 kg/person/day, more than doubling the average 0.68 kg/person/day in 1988 and leading to serious capacity problems of land-fills (Hatyai Municipality, 1999, p. 1; 1996, pp. 2–3).

Highlights of municipality waste separation project and pilot sites

In 1995, Hatyai municipality was declared by the Pollution Control Department (PCD) under the Ministry of Sciences, Technology and Environment as a ‘Pollution Control Zone’. As a result, the municipal authority had to draw up a clear urban environmental management policy and plan, most especially in the area of solid waste management. Policy thrusts oriented toward creating alternative preventive solutions had to be identified. In these initial efforts, the municipality received subsidies from the environment ministry.

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2Urban waste problem has been a growing national pattern in Thailand. Urban communities generate 59% of the total, and only 60–80% of urban residential areas are served for solid waste collection and disposal (Mongkolnchaiarunya, 2005).
Recycling became an attractive solution to Hatyai City’s mounting solid waste problem. A study in 1996 found that a significant quantity of Hatyai’s waste can be reused and recycled. Out of the 200 ton of waste per day, 54.8% is comprised of wet waste, while 39.3% is made up of recyclable materials—plastics, papers, metal and glass. Further, only 10.4% of the total waste, or 20.8 ton per day, was actually being recycled. The study therefore estimated that if the city could optimize recycling of all its recyclable wastes it would save the local government’s handling, transfer and disposal costs of around 14,000 Baht per day or 5 million Baht per year (Hatyai Municipality, 1996, pp. 1–6).

In 1998, the ICSC from Canada joined with Hatyai City authority in finding an effective solution to the city’s waste problem. ICSC initiated a 2-day workshop on sustainable solid waste management in August of the same year. Its main aims were to propose ideas on sustainable solutions and set the direction and guidelines for addressing the problem of waste in the city. A first in the city’s history, the workshop gathered together a total of 121 participants from various groups in the city coming from the private business sector, academic community, civic groups and communities. It defined the direction in addressing the city’s solid waste problem, dividing the tasks into four major areas: (i) waste separation, (ii) building up public awareness, (iii) public participation between public and the state, and (iv) development of sustainable waste disposal system. (This paper will only focus on the waste separation component that, compared to the other three, was most vigorously pursued.)

For the waste separation project, two communities were selected as pilot sites: Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon. Project activities were carried out in these two communities from 1999 to 2000. Based on the author’s own participant observation, focused interviews and documentary research, and also based on a survey of an earlier study (Suwanna, 2002), the following are the key characteristics of these two communities.

Thaihotel community is an urban residential community made up of 1249 households with a total population of 3000. It is located in the old area of the city covering 442,000 m². In terms of basic services physical infrastructure, Thaihotel is comparatively better developed than many other urban communities in Hatyai. Although occupations of residents vary, the community is dominantly made up of middle-income households. The upper stratum of community residents is comprised of relatively well-off business entrepreneurs owning local hotels, motor garages, gas stations, and real estate companies. The middle stratum, comprising almost half of the residents, is made up of middle-level government and private sector employees. Together, these two socio-economic groups make up about 70% of the households of the community. The rest are low-income people who are mostly unskilled wage laborers. Some of them work in local restaurants and hotels. Most of them rent rooms or houses.

On the other hand, Ratanaviboon is a community covering 80,000 m². It has 310 households with a total population of 1329. It is locally perceived as both a low-income residential and a slum community. Unlike Thaihotel, this community is dominated by low-income and poor households. The thin upper social stratum of the community is not as well-off as that in Thaihotel. In Ratanaviboon, this group is mostly made up of government and private sector employees. About 90% of households, however, are definitely low-income and poor. Many of them operate marginal neighborhood stores or food stalls. Many have members who can be classified as unskilled wage laborers. Based on the authors’ observation, a big segment are slum dwellers, living along the railroad and making a living as by scavenging garbage bins and selling recyclables.
to junkshops. These poor households’ live in unstable makeshift houses made from plastic sheets and discarded wood.

During the period of the waste separation project in Hatyai (1998–2001), activities mostly comprised of planning, public orientation meetings, community promotional campaigns, and initial actual waste separation of some households in the two pilot sites. Several months after the launching, it became clear that public involvement was lacking. This was compounded by an operational problem of the inadequacy of separated-waste bins that the municipal authority should be providing. The project was obviously already on an irreversible decline when it was sidelined altogether due to the flood calamity that hit Hatyai in November 2000. It remained sidelined until the partnership contract between Hatyai municipal authority and ICSC drew to a close the following year. Thereafter, Hatyai city thus completely reverted back to its conventional end-of-pipe waste management system.

Quantitative evaluation of participation

An earlier study by Suwanna (2002) using survey method concluded that public participation in both pilot sites was low: 14.0% participated in Thaihotel and 13.7% in Ratanaviboon (see summary Table 1). The study applied various indicators to measure the level of participation such as (1) for project formulation, indicators are number of people who attended the community meeting of the project and who proposed the idea about the solid waste management to the municipality. (2) For project implementation, indicators are relevant households’ activities such as separating waste, placing the waste in the separated bin provided, and attending meetings and training on waste separation. (3) For evaluation, indicators used are the people’s observation toward the performance of the municipal collection crews and responses to the questionnaire regarding the waste separation project (pp. 49–55). Interestingly, the two communities on the whole did not differ significantly in terms of the proportion or rate of households participating. This, despite the observed fact earlier mentioned that Thaihotel was dominated by upper- and middle-level income households, while Ratanaviboon was overwhelmingly comprised of low-income and poor households. Thus, this suggests that environmental awareness—the one key success factor in Western recycling projects—is low in both communities, despite the fact that the residents of Thaihotel have presumably a higher level of education and access to relevant information than those of Ratanaviboon.

In the following section, we present and discuss the empirical evidence gathered by the authors in exploring explanation to this quantitative pattern of public participation in the two communities established in the above-mentioned survey.

Table 1
Household participation rate in waste separation project in Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% of HH participation</th>
<th>% of HH non-participation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thaihotel (N = 254 HHs)</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratanaviboon (N = 64 HHs)</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Adapted from Suwanna (2002, p. 72).
Conditions and major constraints to participation

In this section, an attempt is made to look into more fundamental issues and conditions determining participation by way of probing beyond survey-derived reasons. There is a shift of focus in the analysis—not centering individual survey responses, but on community and supra-community conditions and dynamics of relationships between key players of the project. The focus turns to probing into and analyzing two key issues—opportunity structures for participation and civic culture. In this regard, three subsidiary ‘explanatory hypotheses’ in support of the main hypothesis are advanced and explored: (i) many civic groups are not autonomous or do not have civic engagement, (ii) the public sector still practices a top-down approach that provides no opportunities for participation and (iii) dominance of patronage and clientilism undermines the development of civic culture among local residents. Correspondingly, the presentation of evidence and discussions is divided into three areas: (a) civil society organizations in Hatyai; (b) style of public administration; (c) local officials and community political relations.

Low engagement and lack of autonomy of civil society organizations

Scholars of present-day Thai politics and society have noted that it is difficult to find any evidence to support the view that the state is interested in the development of autonomous civil society organizations that can serve as its partners in pursuing developmental goals in a participatory way. On the contrary, the state has often acted against efforts to strengthen civil society, attempting to co-opt and control it. (Case, 2002, p. 246; Phatharathananunth, 2002, pp. 125–142). In Thailand, present-day development of genuinely autonomous civil society remains very limited—largely elite-led and middle class-based, and its concentration and activism only confined in the capital metropolitan city of Bangkok (Ockey, 2002, p. 121; Case, 2002, p. 169). This quality of civil society organizations is evident in Hatyai.

Private non-profit organizations in Hatyai municipality can be categorized into the following: business and trade associations, civic clubs, local media and academic groups. Business and trade groups in the municipality are the ones most prominent and influential (for example, Songkhla Chamber of Commerce, Hotel Association and Tourism Business Federation of Songkhla). These groups have been established by local businessmen as a way of formalizing networks and contacts for advancing and promoting their business interests and potentials in the provincial market of Southern Thailand. By tradition, these groups are disinclined and inactive in community and municipality-wide developmental or public interest projects, most especially in being active and contributing meaningfully to the city’s growing solid waste problem or local environmental project. Further, the pattern of their relations with the municipal authority has exhibited

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3Suwanna also conducted a survey of possible reasons among people why they did not cooperate. Three are cited: (1) ‘insufficiency of dustbins for separated solid waste’; (2) ‘residents’ time constraints’; and (3) ‘local people did not realize the seriousness of the solid waste problems’. These are expressed choices in the list of reasons in the survey conducted. The authors of this study, however, attempts to look into more fundamental issues and conditions by way of probing deeper into these survey-articulated choices of reasons by expanding focus of analysis not exclusively on individual respondent’s response, but also focusing on community and supra-community conditions and dynamics of relationships that are connected with the project.
pendulum swings over the years: at times being a blind follower or being outright snobbish of public welfare projects initiated by the local government officials. These attitude turnarounds vis-à-vis the municipal authority have been largely due to changes in their set of officers and presidents and the latter’s fit to the municipality’s mayor and ruling electoral party in terms of personal and party affinity.

A few civic clubs in Hatyai municipality have been traditionally active in community work such as health projects, or in citywide developmental projects such as promotion of sports or street cleaning. Three most important ones involved in these concerns are the Lion Hatyai Club, City of Hatyai Study Club and the Love Hatyai Club. Among the three, the last one enjoys privileged support of the municipal authority for its projects, due to the close affinity and electoral support of this group’s leaders to the incumbent mayor and ruling party. The first two, however, are clearly uninvolved and have kept distance from local electoral politics. Consequently, they have not had meaningful partnerships with the municipal authority. They have relied solely on their own members’ and organizations’ resources for their civic projects even though support from and partnership with the local authority for common developmental goals and projects would have been mutually beneficial and enhancing.4

On the other hand, a segment of the local media, particularly print media, has started to cover and highlight environmental issues in special newspaper sections. Generally speaking, these environmentally oriented newspapers’ coverage has not gained local ruling politicians’ and municipal authority’s support and collaboration because of the latter’s intolerance to a kind of free and independent reporting that holds officials publicly accountable for their actions. Ruling politicians would rather limit themselves to utilizing the municipality’s own publicly funded and run newspapers, radio and TV programs. There is one radio program though ostensibly championing local public welfare issues, free speech, and local citizens’ activism in public affairs. This is however initiated and run by the opposition party and a mayoralty candidate in the 1999 elections. Thus, in Hatyai, free and independent media as potential important instruments for local developmentalism, including promotion of sound environmental goals and associated citizens’ involvement or participation, has not thrived. To a large extent, powerful political parties and politicians in power have always regarded and harnessed it in the public sphere as an instrument for advancing particularistic electoral interests and self-centered public-image building.

Academics in Hatyai have in a number of cases become active participants in the municipality’s various development projects. But on the whole, their involvement has been sporadic and tokenistic. For instance, the Faculty of Management Sciences and Faculty of Environmental Management of the Prince of Songhla University have been involved in drafting plans and commenting on the municipality’s development and environmental documents. Their involvement however is mere one-off technical input into these draft papers. Academics and their groups have not been given space nor opportunity to participate meaningfully in decision-making related to the finalization and execution of these draft plans at any stage.5

4Separate individual interviews with a representative of the Lion Hatyai Club (January, 2002) and with a representative of the City of Hatyai Study Club (January, 2002).
5Separate individual interviews with the staff of the Department of Public Administration, the Faculty of Management Sciences (January, 2002 and May, 2003) and the staff of the Faculty of Environmental Management (January, 2002), Prince of Songkla University.
If municipality-wide independent and autonomous organizations are already few and weak in Hatyai, at the community level these are virtually absent. In Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon communities, no independent and autonomous community-based organization existed prior to and—as we would argue here—during the waste separation project. In both places, residents therefore do not have any prior existing stock of experience and training in formally and collectively organized and self-managed projects. According to key informants in the two communities, the waste separation project was their first attempt at organized community development project. Further, they did not have any tradition at all of collective action and mobilization independent of direct supervision and control by municipal authorities.

What existed in the Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon and what was utilized as the main channel for the pilot waste separation project of the municipal authority and ICSC is the community organization and its community committee. In Hatyai, this organization was set up in line with the instructions and guidelines in 1987 of the Office of Urban Development of the Department of Local Administration (DOLA), Minister of Interior. Thirty such community organizations were established following the guidelines DOLA corresponding to one community organization every community area (Hatyai Municipality, n.d., p. 1). The administrative structure of each community organization also conformed to the general guidelines of the DOLA: each organization has a community committee consisting of a chairperson and 14 committee members. In addition, there is a community advisory committee composed of 10 persons.

The basic concept of this particular community organization is based on a putative participatory approach in local government’s basic services delivery. Since local governments have to deal with a huge number of people in providing basic services, they need ‘arms and legs’ and ‘ears’ at the grassroots level to effectively provide them. It is conceived to be the channel for local people’s participation in community development: that is, grassroots participation should be led and mediated by leader of the community organization and by its committee. In this arrangement, the community leader, along with his/her committee, has important responsibilities to fulfill vis-à-vis the municipality, particularly community problem-solving, preparing proposals for community development, and/or implementing municipality’s development program (Raphiphan, 2001, p. 143). For community development projects, the process commonly starts with the municipal authority, which then passes implementation responsibilities and tasks to the community leader and committee for their respective constituencies. This grassroots body is therefore, not self-initiated nor an independently organized group. Rather, it is state-organized and state-mandated, and functions as conduit and extension arm of government to the community.

In Thaihotel, membership in the committee has come from the community’s upper social stratum. Most are active or retired middle-level government personnel. The leader himself, who has occupied the position in the last 6 years, is working in a public sector enterprise. On the other hand, in Ratanaviboon, while the individual members of the community committee are comparatively less well-off than those in Thaihotel, they too are from the upper stratum. For instance, the community leader operates a small commercial business enterprise in the city center, while her vice-chairman also has a stable modest size grocery store in the neighborhood. Both means of livelihood are—by Ratanaviboon standards—associated with the local neighborhood’s ‘rich’. This narrow elite composition of leadership at the community, as we will discuss in a later
section, has interlocked with provincial and city elite interests in a bureaucratized system of patronage.

Traditional top-down style of public administration

So far, the paper has argued that low engagement and lack of autonomy of civil society organizations in Hatyai conditioned low participation in the waste separation project. Another important dimension of the issue of opportunity structure is participatory public administration which will be dealt with in this section. Along with a number of other Southeast Asian countries as the Philippines, and Indonesia (and to a certain extent, Malaysia and Singapore), Thailand has been evolving democracy in the last two decades. The type of democracy that it has developed, however, has been characterized as unconsolidated and low-quality democracy when compared to its neighbors (Case, 2002). Thailand’s transition to political democracy in particular has been limited to procedural aspects such as competitive elections and the expansion of provincial capitalists’ power through the medium of political parties. It has not yet entailed any deepening of democratic processes such as diffusion and redistribution of power and the empowerment of local and grassroots social forces, and setting up and stabilizing participatory, accountable and transparent public institutions (Connors, 2002). During the transition, political parties have risen in importance as new route for attaining elite statuses in Thailand, breaking the traditional monopoly of military and bureaucratic apparatuses as the channels for acquiring power. These electoral parties, however, have not yet been the type of ideologically guided and platform-based parties as often found in mature liberal democracies. Rather, they have been penetrated by business groups and represented narrow business sector interests. They still revolved around strongman personalities with very little role in articulating liberal or egalitarian ideologies before mass electorates, in aggregating social aspirations or in drawing popular and sustained grassroots support. They have mainly served as instruments for crudely seizing cabinet portfolios, and pocketing state resources (Case, 2002, pp. 147–199; Callahan, 1998, p. 151; Phatharathananunth, 2002, p. 128). Popular political participation has not yet developed well under this low-quality democracy, and often, it is being curtailed.

Recent democratic decentralization drive in Thailand at the community and provincial levels has not helped much either in promoting participation at the grassroots. Decentralized functions and authority have remained captive of elite domination, albeit by local elite. Their control at the local level has in fact been strengthened, negating the rhetoric of participatory planning that has accompanied the devolution of central authority (Aghiros, 2002). Further, it has been observed that in the provinces, village-based leaders who constitute the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), an extra-village putative participatory forum for grassroots development planning, has imbibed the official bureaucracy’s hierarchical and non-participatory culture themselves making their roles suspect as the lowest-level state agents who ought to promote community participation (Aghiros, 2002).

Hatyai is no exception to this traditional style of leadership and administration pervasive in Thailand. Top-downism, tokenistic participation and outright exclusion of the grassroots people and lower-level bodies characterize development project planning and implementation by the municipal authority. These attributes are evident in several critical aspects of planning,
implementation and problem-solving in the project of waste separation. Most important indications and highlights of these are the following:

a. By and large, major project decisions were being made by the municipal authority and the ICSC staff (with a putative imprimatur of the sub-stakeholder committee\(^6\)) without prior substantive consultation and participation of direct stakeholders and affected grassroots people. Two critical decisions were taken in a manner that was undoubtedly top-down and imposed: (1) utilization of state-mandated and state-controlled community organization and its committee as the sole channel and conduit for popular involvement in waste separation project, prejudicing the chance of community people’s meaningful participation and partnership with the municipal authority based on the independence and autonomy of their representations; and (2) identification and selection of the two pilot sites—Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon—without any prior information sharing, consultation, and consent by the community people themselves.

b. As a lower body agency, the community committee was marginalized in operational planning and decision-making during the project implementation. If at all committee leaders and members were invited to municipal-level discussions and forums, they performed a passive role, and their participation tokenistic. It was understood that their main duty was simply to carry out the policy and plans already decided upon in another meeting. Clearly, discussions and decision-making on particular components of implementation such as storage bins, collection of separated waste and budgeting were done in earlier separate meetings exclusively attended by important staff personnel of various line offices (such as Cleaning Service Section, the Environmental Promotion sub-division, Public Relations Section and the staff of ICSC) and presided over by municipal officials. Even as the authenticity of the community committees’ substantive representation role is questionable due to this organization’s virtual lack of autonomy (discussed earlier), nonetheless this lower-level body’s inclusion in a higher-level decision forums run by the municipal authority is a distinct legitimate procedural issue of decentralized participatory governance.

c. Municipal authority and its ICSC partner operated on the basis of a strong pre-conceived notion that local community people are essentially supportive of solid waste separation project. Low turn-out in mass orientation meetings and low rate of households involvement in actual waste separation practice were automatically interpreted to be mere deficits of technical information and knowledge (or the ‘how-to’) or certain weakness in operational details. Thus, ‘solutions’ adopted to generate public support and household enthusiasm were automatically geared toward further boosting information campaigns through renewed use of billboards, more street signs, more massive pamphlet distribution, and more intensive house-to-house sortsies enjoining people to join the project. Not once did the authority and ICSC saw the necessity of inventing new forums and mechanisms where community people’s views and opinions regarding the project itself and the basis of their possible involvement can be

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\(^6\)During the launching workshop of the project conducted by the ICSC and Hatyai Municipality City authority on August 3, 4, 1998, a sub-stakeholder committee was set up to promote the separation of waste in the city and to operationalize this goal. Its members came from various interest groups such as business groups, and also from the academic institutions and ‘community representatives’. This committee however did not meet regularly and, therefore, effectively the municipal authority and ICSC representative supervised and managed the implementation of the project.
creatively and thoroughly probed into and translated into a new set of agenda for a new round of effective public discussions where possibilities for meaningful community people–municipal authority collaboration can be shaped.

*Patron–client political relations*

Thus, low civic engagement, lack of autonomous organizations, and traditional top-down administration have hindered the development of participation. Since Thailand is in a state of transition, one expects that these two conditions are not yet met. However, the question remains whether the sphere of politics allows for the development of civic culture? If transition is to be completed and if a fuller democracy is to be achieved, then politics will have to entail sharing power and restructuring of key relationships in the local public sphere. However, traditional patron–client relation between elected officials and their constituencies has been observed to remain especially strong in the provincial Thailand, both in its rural and urban areas, where autonomous civil society organizations are also often non-existent or politically insignificant and also where top-down, non-participatory traditional style of leadership by officials pervades.

In Hatyai, a study of its municipal council and mayor system highlights the maintenance by its mayor of a stable circle of most influential people and a wide informal network of supporters as one of the most important strategy that enabled him to consistently win elections over opponents during a period lasting 29 years (from 1973 to 2002). An important cog of this network machinery is the community organization and committee discussed earlier. In fact, most of the leaders and members of these committees belong to the neighborhood elite who are kin, party mates or personal friends of the mayor or municipal council members (Katpasa, 1999).

In Hatyai, patron–client relationship dominates this network of political support for the elected mayor and council members. The mayor acts as the big patron, ensuring that municipal projects are conducted in communities, with especial favors of course going to his election bailiwicks. Once every year, ‘the visit of the mayor’ or ‘meeting on people project’ is organized in each of the 30 communities, which the mayor and his retinue of municipal staff personally attends. These are occasions for local leaders to ask for community projects, and on the other hand, for the mayor to nurture and sustain a popular image as the great provider of gifts and services. In Hatyai, this has been practiced for no less than 21 years.

In return, community committees are expected to deliver votes for the mayor and his team of candidates during elections. As some informants belonging to community committee told the authors, their role during elections has been to mobilize kin, neighbors, and friends—or their own neighborhood following—to vote for the mayor’s team.

After elections, it is the elected officials’ turn to repay their debt of votes to the community committee lest the latter risks isolating itself from its followers. Paybacks often constituted of all-expenses-paid ‘study’ trips to other places in the country. Also, easier access to vehicles and equipment of the municipality is provided to community leaders for their projects.

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7We define patron–client relationship here as a continuing relationship wherein the powerful party or persons offer the rewards (often gifts or access to material benefits) for the weak party or subordinates in return for the latter’s loyalty and support.

8Separate focus group interviews with community leaders in Hatyai City (May, 2003).

9Individual in-depth interview with municipal official of Hatyai Municipality (May, 2003).
Moreover, on special occasions such as New Year festival, they are given special gifts by municipal officials.\(^{10}\)

Community leaders and committee members of the two pilot sites of the projects have been known to be close supporters of the mayor long before they assumed their official positions. They are also active electoral campaigners for the ruling party in mayoralty and council elections. Similar to the loyalty and behavior of most community leaders in Hatyai, they have mediated and have acted as gatekeepers of the city mayor’s community services, and do benefit as such. Thus, even as they ‘represented’ the local communities in the sub-sectoral stakeholders’ meeting, understandably they did not challenge in any meaningful way decisions already taken by the municipal mayor’s office regarding the conduct of waste separation project. Nor did they publicly raise any issue about their marginalization and tokenistic participation in relevant decision-making processes.

Thus, in the context of Thailand’s evolution of democracy, patronage politics continue to dominate and characterize practices and patterns of relationships between elected public officials and their constituencies at various levels (Callahan, 1998; Phatharathananunth, 2002). But this is only one side of the coin.

Pervasiveness of patronage in the conduct of municipal officials and traditional top-down style in public administration has, on the other hand, bred an unhealthy clientelistic outlook on the part of community people vis-à-vis local government’s and officials’ normative role in delivery of basic services. In the two pilot communities, members of upper-, middle- and lower-level strata generally have a very strong mindset that solid waste management and all its associated problems should be left entirely to the municipal officials’ responsibility. The latter ought to be sole provider of a cheap and efficient collection service of household trash, and that the local people should basically be passive beneficiaries. Such has always been the practice before and—common expectation has it—should be continued. This popular un-civic mindset logically has resulted in the amazement of residents upon being asked to devote extra effort and own time to tasks of separating wastes at home and transferring them to special collection bins, and to also being mobilized to attend meetings for the project. Change in routine practices required by the new system often sparked doubts and questions from residents about the basic competence of incumbent officials in delivering basic services.\(^{11}\) Incidentally, this clientilistic outlook of the local people, who have been nurtured in a dominant culture of patronage and paternalism played out by local politicians themselves, is also common in many urban areas of Thailand. People have been used to receiving this service from local government and elected officials at almost free of charge, and generally they ignore their own active roles in improving the situation (Mongkolnchaiaiarunya, 2005).

**Main findings**

Through qualitative interviews, documentary research, and reconstruction of events of the projects, and through the use of studies on present-day socio-political and state characteristics in

\(^{10}\)Focus group interviews with the community leaders in Hatyai City (May, 2003).

\(^{11}\)Focus group interviews with the community leaders in Hatyai City (May, 2003).
Thailand at various levels, the three subject areas—state of civil society organizations, top-down administrative approaches, patronage and clientalism—were explored to find major explanatory factors to the low rate of public involvement in the waste separation earlier established in a study survey (Suwanna, 2002). Three closely related and mutually reinforcing explanatory factors are identified, namely:

- Extreme dearth and weakness of autonomous civil society organizations in Hatyai municipality and their absence in the pilot communities of Thaihotel and Ratanaviboon was a basic condition which allowed the municipal authority and ICSC to conveniently conduct the waste separation program depending solely on existing state-mandated and -controlled community organizations and their leadership. This quasi-state organizations did not serve the purpose of developing authentic grassroots activism, independence and autonomy, and adequate civic and environmental awareness of the people required to deliver higher and more intensive participation for project success.

- Traditional top-down and non-participatory style of public administration by the municipal authority disallowed popular and direct involvement in planning, decision-making and implementation by the community people in the project in all stages. It also stymied the initiative and participation of the local in higher-level forums of planning and decision-making. This traditional style of leadership conduct by the municipal authority precluded the development of any sense of co-ownership and co-production of the project among the local people, while fostering popular avoidance and passivity.

- Dominance of patron–client relation between the local government officials and community people and an associated lack of civic awareness among the latter precluded the possibility of self-initiated and sustained collective community mobilization for solving waste problem and improving management through the project. This unhealthy clientelistic outlook was further sustained and reproduced under conditions of lack of genuinely autonomous civil society organizations and the top-downism of the municipal officials.

Based on other studies of present-day Thai socio-politics and public administration, all of these three conditions and patterns found in Hatyai municipality are closely similar and related to national patterns and conditions elsewhere in Thailand.

Conclusions

Main findings corroborate the main hypothesis that absence or lack of civic culture and publicly tested opportunity structures for participation—factors that in turn generate heightened environmental awareness and public education and sense of co-production or partnerships with public authority among local citizens—will seriously undermine the chance of success of at-source waste separation in less-developed democracies in developing countries. Three interrelated and mutually reinforcing major obstacles have been identified: (1) dearth and weakness of autonomous civil society organizations; (2) dominance of traditional top-down and non-participatory style of public administration by the municipal authority; and (3) deep-rootedness of patron–client relation between the local government officials and community people and an
associated lack of civic awareness. Separately and in combination, these three factors undermined the development of heightened environmental awareness and public education, and generation of a sense of co-production and partnership in the waste separation project.

The case presented here highlights the point that while being laudable in ecological soundness and the way forward in solving developing country cities’ waste crises, at-source waste separation program is not easily transferable. Unlike developed country cities, Third World cities often do not have the particular complex of liberal democratic institutions and tradition that can easily generate the critical factors for the project’s success. That said, we do not wish however to imply here that non-end-of-pipe solutions to waste problems are doomed in developing country cities. Sensitivity to distinct socio-political context of the project is essential. And the challenge is how to build into the project conceptualization, design and implementation process itself important features and mechanisms that will deliberately promote salient local governance reforms, in order to generate the participation and civic culture required for alternative sustainable solid waste management to likely succeed.

References


