

Twinning in Thailand:
Part 1: An Effective Municipal Partnership

by

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Introduction

Increasingly, municipal exchanges are emerging as a major forum for improved understanding among communities in different parts of the world. In the Canadian context, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) International Office is the focal point for a successful Municipal Partnerships program. In 1987, with the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the FCM established a formal program of municipal exchanges. Since then, many Municipal Partnerships have been created between Canadian municipalities and their partners in the developing world. The FCM program is designed to provide opportunities for partnering municipal administrators, staff, and political leaders to share their experiences and apply their knowledge in practical situations in different cultures and communities. The goal of the Partnership program “is to improve quality of life, access to basic human necessities, and local capacity to define and carry out sustainable programs that meet development needs.”¹

Municipal partnerships can be a major development aid tool in today’s era of rapid urbanization. Former agricultural societies are becoming increasingly urbanized. Rapid growth in urban centres such as Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Bangkok and elsewhere generate serious social, environmental and infrastructure problems. Some of the more serious concerns facing these urbanizing areas include: an imbalance of population distribution, economic development and job creation, inadequate housing, environmental degradation, poor services, shortage of financial and human resources, and the absence of meaningful local participation in planning and economic development.

In Thailand, 60 percent of the population live in rural areas, but agriculture activities only contribute about ten percent of the national gross domestic product. Typically rural Thai households derive only about 35 percent of their income from agriculture with the rest coming from non-farm activities and remittances from urban relatives.² During the past several decades, Thailand has shifted from an agricultural-based economy to an urban-oriented one dominated by

manufacturing and service industries. Rapid industrial expansion has come with a heavy environmental price in the form of serious air, surface and groundwater pollution. Employment opportunities led to migration from rural to urban areas. Such migration and subsequent urban population growth further exacerbates the many problems facing Thailand's municipalities.

The FCM's Municipal Partnership program strives to match Canadian municipalities with partners in relatively similar circumstances. In the partnering of Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani, two relatively similar municipalities have been paired and are working together to deal with the many challenges facing their local communities.

Thailand Local Government

Unlike Canada's federal system with constitutional powers divided between federal and provincial governments, Thailand is a unitary state with all powers resting with the central government. Thailand has 73 central government controlled provinces, including the metropolis of Greater Bangkok. Each province is administered by an appointed governor and district administrators (all career civil servants within the Ministry of the Interior). Along with their role in supporting urban municipalities, the provinces serve the needs of small communities and rural areas, often based on policies of the central ministries rather than on local requirements. Unlike Canada, Thai municipalities are not units of these centrally administered provinces but rather were created by and respond to the national government.³ Similar to Canadian municipalities, Thai local government is not a constitutional government but rather a form of statutory government. They may only act where authority has been delegated to them by the central government through appropriate legislation.

The central government has divided service provision responsibilities between local government and the province. Municipalities tend to be responsible for services to property, while the central government and provinces provide services to people. In recent years this

division has been changing as the central government has been delegating more people-related responsibilities to local government (such as elementary education and social welfare). Local governments provide roads, solid waste collection and disposal, wastewater collection and treatment, potable water supply, and building development along with basic health care, welfare, civil registration, and elementary level education. The central government through each province provides policing, traffic management, higher education, public health care (hospitals), low cost housing, job creation, and economic development.

Municipalities in Thailand are divided into three types: city municipality (*Tesaban Nakhon*) which has a population of at least 50,000; town municipality (*Tesaban Muang*) with a population of at least 10,000; and, a sub-district municipality (*Tesaban Tambon*) established within an urban community by the central government. Municipal status determines the size and nature of the elected council. In the case of a city municipality (such as Ubon Ratchathani), the council consists of 24 elected members. The elected members of council request the leader of the elected majority party to serve as mayor, who in turn appoints four deputy-mayors from within the elected body to serve as the executive committee. The Council also elects a Chair of Council. The executive committee serves in a role similar to the Canadian council-commissioner system, in which each of the four deputy-mayors is responsible for administering selected areas of the municipality.

With the exception of the Bangkok Metropolitan Area, few municipalities have an adequate tax base and funding sources to support local initiatives. This makes local government dependent on central government grants (both conditional and general). This dependence tends to tie local governments to national priorities and limits their autonomy.

Unlike Canadian municipalities that receive the majority of their funding from property taxes, Thai municipalities are limited in this taxing field as all owner-occupied housing and apartments, government-owned properties, charities and religious institutions, and investments in priority areas are exempt from taxation. For example, in Chiang Mai, one of Thailand's larger

cities, less than 14 percent of its houses are subject to property taxes. In addition to property taxes, Thai municipalities receive revenues from other taxes such as land development, slaughterhouse and signboards as well as surcharges on businesses and entertainment along with some shared taxes with central government (rice, automobile and vehicle taxes). However, local tax collection is often inefficient leading to municipal funding shortages.

Economic development, job creation, and land use planning are controlled by central agencies. Each activity requires local involvement to ensure community needs are reflected. For example, in Ubon Ratchathani, the local Chamber of Commerce was particularly keen on developing trade opportunities with Fredericton, New Brunswick and Canada as a means of enhancing local economic activity. Despite this local desire, national prerogatives of the central government might work against this local initiative.

Even more startling to Canadians is the lack of local involvement in land use planning. Plans are prepared for local communities by central agencies in Bangkok, ostensibly due to the lack of planning expertise at the municipal level. However, there have been indications that planning, like other centralized services will be devolved to local governments. In the Canadian context, the lack of local professional planning expertise in smaller communities is often mitigated by using central planners or consultants using extensive public participation to ensure plans reflect local community aspirations and values. A similar approach could be used in Thailand, particularly as the new *Constitution Act of 1997* calls for increased public participation in community decision-making.

One unique, but disturbing, feature of Thailand local government, is that senior municipal administrative and professional staff are centrally appointed and serve as career officers in the Ministry of the Interior. Their professional development at the municipal level is controlled by the central government, not the local council. The central government's Municipal Personnel Commission determines position classifications, size of staff for each municipality, recruitment, transfers (normally every two to four years), training, promotion, discipline, and retirement.

Effectively, the local council have little, if any, say on the recruitment and selection of their key staff. However, local councils can hire junior staff and large forces of temporary workers for various public works activities.

Undoubtedly, municipal staff have divided loyalties in this process of central staff appointments. Where senior municipal staff may support local initiatives, their guiding policies and requirements are set by a central agency. Future transfers and promotion prospects depend upon their adherence to central regulations rather than local initiatives. In some cases, senior municipal staff, with council's permission, seek to remain in a given community rather than being transferred elsewhere. Often these staff come from the local area and seek to remain close to their family home. Thus, they establish local loyalties but sacrifice career advancement opportunities.

Local governments in Thailand face many challenges. Addressing these challenges requires human capacity building - providing management education and skills, ensuring adequate resources are available (through tax reform and other revenue generating mechanisms), increasing accountability (by setting and monitoring key performance indicators), and enhancing service provision. Canadian municipal partners should be able to assist in many of these areas, thus contributing to improving local government in Thailand.

Next month's edition of *Municipal World* will contain a detailed discussion of the partnership between Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand in Part II of this article.

Endnotes

1. Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Municipal Partnerships: Participants Handbook*, 2nd ed., Ottawa, 1997, p.7.
2. *Thailand (2001-2003)*, Country Assistance Plan, Asian Development Bank, Manila, December 2000, p. 12.
3. Orathai Kokpol, "Thailand", in P. L. McCarney (ed.), *The Changing Nature of Local Government in Developing Countries*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1996, pp. 135-168.

