RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Influence of Socio-cultural Conditions on Inter-Local Collaboration: Rethinking Resource-Dependency Theory from the Lessons of Thailand

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Abstract: This study aims to map out the practices of inter-local collaboration in Thailand and understand the conditions that facilitate the formation and sustainability of the existing collaboration. The mixed methods research design was employed by which in-depth interviews of specific cases were adopted to elaborate on the statistical findings. The study found that, for the most part, inter-local collaboration in the largest region of the country was asymmetric. The case study findings undermine resource dependency theory, given that councils with larger resources can become locked-in to disadvantageous relationships with, and be controlled by, smaller councils with fewer resources. This is because asymmetric relationships and vertical forms of inter-local collaboration were facilitated by the strong hierarchical social system prevalent in Thai culture and the Thai local government system, in which the "big brother" council is expected to help smaller "new-born" councils. This influence of socio-cultural conditions on inter-local collaboration, thus, should be taken into account in existing theories of inter-local collaboration so that they move beyond consideration only of legal-institutional perspectives.

Keywords: cross-council collaboration, inter-local collaboration, resource-dependency theory, socio-cultural conditions, Thai local government

Inter-local collaboration has been implemented as a policy mechanism to improve the capacity of local governments in countries around the world for decades. It is widely accepted as an innovative mechanism that enables local governments with limited resources to achieve greater efficiencies and economies of scale in the provision of services, without losing local control and undermining political identities. Since the 1950s, local governments in developed countries have played a vital role in providing public services (Hulst, van Montfort, Haveri, Airaksinen, & Kelly, 2009).

However, over the past decades, local councils in Western countries have faced challenges in producing improved public services while reducing costs in the face of austerity (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007; Hulst et al., 2009). To deal with such pressure, councils, particularly small councils, have begun engaging in the joint provision of public services to achieve economies of scope and scale, increase cost-efficiencies in delivering services, and meet the rising demands of citizens (Bish & Ostrom, 1973; Morgan & Hirlinger, 1991; Hulst et al., 2009). In recent years, inter-local

collaboration in Western countries has been growing through various types of institutional arrangements, designed to achieve efficiency in delivering services, achieve shared goals, fulfil specific tasks (Labianca, 2014), and "to increase the capacity for solving policy problems that escape the boundaries of a single municipality" (Hulst & van Montfort, 2011, p. 122). Nowadays, inter-local collaboration, particularly joint public service delivery, is a widespread phenomenon throughout the world (Stoner, 1964; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Warner, 2006; Hulst et al., 2009; Hulst & Van Montfort, 2011; Labianca, 2014).

Regarding inter-local collaboration in the context of Thailand, this idea is not at all new. It was stipulated in the Municipality Act of 1953 (2019) that a syndicate can be established as a legal entity, based on the formal collaboration between two or more municipalities, in order to address policy issues of shared concern. However, a syndicate can be established only between municipalities, not other types of local government. Furthermore, municipalities that have used a syndicate for collaborative working are scarce (College of Local Government Development, 2006). Besides a syndicate, inter-local collaboration has been implemented in both formal and informal ways. Nevertheless, most collaboration is informal, where collaborative working relationships usually occur among neighboring local governments and is grounded on close relationships between local leaders, albeit relationships are not based upon any written agreement. Regarding formalized collaboration based on written agreements, studies by the Department of Local Administration (2008) showed that some local governments had implemented formal collaboration by establishing partnerships based on a formal contract designed to achieve the joint delivery of public services.

The adoption of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B. E. 2550 provided further opportunity for local governments to engage in collaboration. Section 283 stipulates that inter-local collaboration should be supported and that "a new service provider organization" can be established, based on collaboration between local governments, to deliver efficient local services to citizens (Department of Local Administration, 2008). To grasp this opportunity and to address the issues mentioned, the Department of Local Administration (2008) conducted two operational pilot studies between 2005 and 2012 on local government collaboration, covering six local areas, to provide possible models

of collaboration. The first project was an operational study of the way the local governments have cooperated with others to address three cross-cutting issues, all of which require inter-local government collaboration: waste disposal, infrastructure construction and maintenance, and disaster prevention and mitigation. The findings of the first study show that establishing a new service provider based on formal collaboration between local governments to tackle common issues and to deliver services of shared concerned is only one model that could be recommended, given prevailing legal restrictions.

Although windows of opportunity for local government collaboration exist in Thailand and some practices are already recognized, there has been no attempt to explore Thai inter-local collaboration. Thus, this study aims to map out the practices of inter-local collaboration in Thailand and understand the conditions that facilitate the formation and sustainability of the existing collaboration.

To draw on lessons learned from this context, this study uses abductive reasoning to emphasize the influence of extant conditions emerging from the ground up, referred to here as socio-culture, which in this context refers to the Eastern oriented culture that paved the way for a fruitful discussion on Western collaborative theory. To shed light on this, the study begins by discussing theoretical perspectives, which will help frame our understanding of inter-local collaboration. The focus will be on exchange theory and resource-dependency theory. Having done that, this study discusses the mixed-methods used to collect and analyze the data. After that, an overview of inter-local collaboration in Thailand's largest region is presented, before a discussion on the conditions that influence collaborative practice. Lastly, this study highlights the influence of socio-cultural conditions in particular, before offering concluding remarks.

Theoretical Perspectives

A local authority has the autonomy to decide whether or not to enter into collaboration, which suggests that collaboration is voluntary. However, it is important to recognize that local authorities are not hermetically sealed organizations; they need flows of resources from their environment to survive. Two theories explain this phenomenon. The first, exchange

theory, focuses on situations in which organizations have equal resources. Resource dependency theory explores situations where resources are distributed unequally.

Exchange Theory

Exchange theory, developed by Levine and White (1962), posits that collaboration will occur when service providers of a particular public service in a fragmented system voluntarily seek to form interagency relationships. This is done to address the scarcity of necessary resources, so that shared goals can be achieved. Levine and White (1962) used health and service care providers, a highly fragmented sector, as an illustrative case. They showed that the fragmented nature of the sector motivated agencies to voluntarily work together because service providers faced resource scarcities, as "hospitals were reliant on primary care providers for referrals of service users. And these primary care bodies needed to refer on because they did not have resources to treat such individuals" (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002, p. 37). A voluntary transfer of resources between hospital and primary care providers was made so that each agency was able to access resources controlled by each other needed to accomplish their goals.

Exchange theory assumes that collaboration will form when individual organizations exhibit two characteristics (Skelcher & Sullivan, 2008). First, they hold shared objectives or have mutual benefits. Second, the necessary resources for the fulfillment of an individual organization's goals are controlled by other agencies in the system, where few agencies are able to access sufficient resources to complete their objectives. Resource scarcity, therefore, motivates voluntary exchange relations between various organizations that have equal resource bases in the pursuit of their respective goals. Viewed this way, collaboration is seen optimistically as a phenomenon that occurs because of a shared desire by partners to achieve positive outcomes and seek absolute gains for the whole system or mutual benefits, rather than individual benefits (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). This enlightened shared-interest perspective of partners is a unique feature that underpins exchange theory. Skelcher and Sullivan (2008) asserted that because not one agency dominates the distribution of resources, exchange theory can be perceived as a positive sum game of collaborative formation.

Resource-Dependency Theory

Several scholars asserted that another important motivation for collaboration is resource dependency (Aiken & Hage, 1968;Weiss, 1987; O'Toole, 1997; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Resource-dependency theory proposes that in a situation of resource scarcity, where resources are distributed unequally, organizations collaborate with others by attempting to control or influence each other's activities to access critical scarce resources (Benson, 1975; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Individual gain is the top priority above all else (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002).

In contrast to the optimistic perspective underpinning exchange theory, resource-dependency theory assumes that when an organization is dependent on external, scarce resources to execute the tasks for which it has a responsibility, each organization may attempt to influence or control the domains and activities of others (Emerson, 1962; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). An organization that controls more critical resources than others may use this power to maintain or enhance their position by encouraging dependent organizations to become partners. On the other hand, organizations lacking in-house resources and expertise may establish dependence on others in the network to obtain critical scarce resources so that they can function normally (Krueathep, Riccucci, & Suwanmala, 2010). Hence, Skelcher and Sullivan (2008) labeled this theory as a pessimist view of collaboration because of its underlying assumptions, which are as follows:

> Resource dependencies create power differentials in the inter-organizational network. Consequently the motivation to interact is likely to be asymmetrical, with one or more organizations inducing or forcing others to interact. (p. 758)

Although the starting point for collaboration in exchange theory is similar to resource dependency theory, in that an individual organization seeks to access the essential resources controlled by other organizations to fulfill their goals, their fundamental perspective is different. Although exchange theory applies in "organisational systems that have a high normative regard for altruistic behaviour and a strong respect for others' autonomy" (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002, p.38), resource dependency theory is relevant in

situations in which each organization may challenge or influence other's activities to secure their position in the system (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). As the Thai case resembles this latter situation, the resource dependency theory is deployed in this study.

Methods

This study was conducted between 2016 and 2017. It started with a review of the existing academic work, reports, and grey literature. Then, a survey was conducted. This survey was sent to all local government bodies—a total of 2,967, involved in 2,259 inter-local governmental collaborative projects. Eight hundred eighty-one replies were received.

To analyze the survey data, descriptive and inferential statistical analysis were used. After that, 30 local government units were purposively chosen based on their different collaborative issues and forms of collaboration. After which, secondary data for each was sought from previous research, local news sources, websites, Facebook pages, and maps. Then, several structured interviews were conducted, which were analyzed using network analysis, incentive analysis, interaction analysis, and thematic analysis. Lastly, reflections on the analysis of inter-local collaboration were offered by local leaders during an event that was organized to reward those who had offered outstanding examples of collaboration.

Critical points that emerged from the survey analysis were used to develop topic guides in the structured interviews. A point was deemed critical if the quantitative data proved insufficient in offering an adequate explanation of the phenomenon, and further qualitative explanation was required. The response of interviewees was recorded, as were points of interests that occurred to us, what we learned, and some comparisons of different interviews. Purposive sampling was employed to select interviewees. The critical points were used to create three selection criteria used to select participants: (1) being politicians and senior officers involved in the cases under investigation, (2) having experienced collaborative working and been involved in either the formation or implementation of inter-local collaboration policy, and (3) access can be facilitated via the intermediaries. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at council offices. Prior to the interview, an information sheet and a consent form were provided to respondents by email

and post to ensure that participants were fully informed about the objectives of the study and questions that would be asked. They acknowledged that their participation was voluntary and their confidentiality was protected.

Results

The study found that inter-local collaboration was widely practiced in the largest region of Thailand, the North-East. Collaborative mechanisms in this region most commonly focused around local environmental policy, elderly care policy, waste management policy, disaster relief policy, agricultural infrastructure policy, tourism policy, and cultural promotion policy. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was typically used to foster collaboration, whereas official contracts were typically used when agricultural infrastructure development and cultural promotion were the focus of collaboration. Environment and disaster relief, however, depended mainly on formal collective actions. Details can be shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Issues and Means of Collaboration

Issues	Means of collaboration
Agricultural infrastructure	Official contact (47.10%)
Elderly care	MOU (60.60%)
Tourism	MOU (50.00%)
Waste management	MOU (40.00%)
Environment and disaster relief	Formal collective actions (33.30%)
Cultural promotion	Official contact (44.00%)
Others (e.g., education, health services)	MOU (52.40%)

Regarding the reasons for collaboration, the survey found that resource constraints (whether concerning budgets, staff, tools, or technology) were the most common drivers (93.22%), followed by a lack of information and knowledge (39.51%), and the fact that they were facing wicked problems, that is, the problems that could not be handled successfully by a single agency working alone or which extended beyond their territory (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). Environmental sustainability, disaster management, health care, waste management, infrastructure

construction and maintenance, and unemployment are all examples of wicked problems. Inter-local collaboration is a widely accepted mechanism for dealing with the wicked issues as it has the capacity to bring together necessary resources and the collective action of stakeholders (Warner, 2006). Details are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

The Reasons for Collaboration

The reasons for collaboration	Percentage
Organizational resources constraints	93.22
Insufficient budget	37.09
Inadequate staff	30.91
Inadequate tools and technology	25.22
The lack of information and knowledge	39.51
Facing wicked problems	18.46
Without authority	15.45
Beyond territory	6.62

These findings do not throw up any particular surprises. Indeed, they mirror existing research on inter-local collaboration that resource scarcity is one of the important motivations for inter-organizational collaboration (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Krueathep et al., 2010). However, a critical observation emerged from the quantitative analysis that followed: most small local governments (TAO) collaborated with larger local governments (PAO or municipalities) although collaboration amongst local governments of similar size rarely occurred, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Types of Local Governments in Collaborative Relationships

Types of local government	Types of other local governments collaborating		
	PAO	M	TAO
Provincial Administrative Organisations (PAO)	25.00%	50.00%	75.00%
Municipality (M)	50.00%	25.00%	75.00%
Tambon Administrative Organisations (TAO)	75.00%	75.00%	25.00%

In addition, it was found that cultural conservation and traditional festival were frequently the focus of collaboration (12.76% of total collaborative projects). This is a result of the rich culture and efforts to conserve and promote it, which required more than one actor. Importantly, the survey showed that when thinking about the conditions underpinning collaboration, local governments did not consider: (1) the unequal relations between them, (2) the fact that collaboration depended too much on individual relations, (3) the collaborative culture, (4) the informal individual tie relations, and (5) trust (see Table 4). The initial interpretation of this finding is that they do not think that these socio-cultural conditions would either constrain or sustain collaboration, as such conditions were already rich and supportive in this context.

Furthermore, the survey also revealed that inter-local collaboration depended highly on the behavior of leaders. The statistical analysis shows that the length with which local leaders remained in their role correlated significantly with the duration of collaboration, as shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Conditions That Affected Lasting Collaboration

Conditions that affected lasting collaboration	Percentage
Unsupportive legal framework	20.05
a lack of incentives	16.21
A lack of adequate deliberation	12.14
A lack of collaborative skills	9.45
Unequal relations amongst local governments	7.37
Depending too much on individual relations	6.68
A lack of collaborative culture	6.68
A lack of informal individual tie relations	6.22
Low levels of trust among local governments	5.76

From Table 5, it is clear that quantitative data could not sufficiently explain the nexus of the emergence of asymmetrical relations within the collaboration, the role of culture, and the legacy of leaders. These phenomena

are viewed here as socio-cultural conditions, thus necessitating further qualitative data, which can offer richer, more nuanced explanation than quantitative analysis alone. The case of Roi-Et Province is selected as a case to explore these themes further.

Roi-Et is a province in the northeast of Thailand and is home to 203 local governmental units (Department of Local Administration, 2014). Roi-Et's Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) is the upper-tier local government. There are 73 municipalities delivering services in urban areas and 129 TAOs providing services for people in rural areas. In 2007, four neighboring councils in Roi-Et (Roi-Et Municipality, Nua-muang TAO, Donglan TAO, and Robmuang TAO) voluntarily formed a highly integrated joint working team on disaster prevention and mitigation. Their collaborative journey started with joint service provision underpinned by a written agreement, which was developed from their loose institutional relationship that was grounded upon the interpersonal relationship between local leaders.

Phase 1: Loose Collaboration for Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Services (1990s–2007)

The genesis of the loose institutional cross-council relationship—which led to the formal joint service that was underpinned by written agreement—was driven by resource constraint and interdependency issues facing the TAOs, which restricted their ability to deliver disaster prevention and mitigation services effectively. In this area, only Roi-Et municipality had the capacity to provide such a service, and neighboring councils lack qualified staff and equipment and had smaller budgets. Due to their limited capacity and resources, each TAO chose to establish a relationship with Roi-Et municipality so that they could receive assistance from the larger, more powerful council. This meant that when a disaster occurred, for example, a fire, in the territory of one of these neighboring TAOs, the mayor of the TAO asked the mayor of Roi-Et municipality to send staff and fire engines to help control it. Viewed this way, the interaction between Roi-ET and each TAO in this phase is conceptualized as a network, an interagency relationship based on high-level personal relationships.

Table 5

Relations Between the Length the Leaders Remained in Their Role and the Duration of Collaboration

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	10.430	1	10.430	13.699	.021
Residual	3.045	4			
Total	13.475	5			

Note: The dependent variable is the period of collaboration, and the predictor (constant) is the length with which leaders remained in their role.
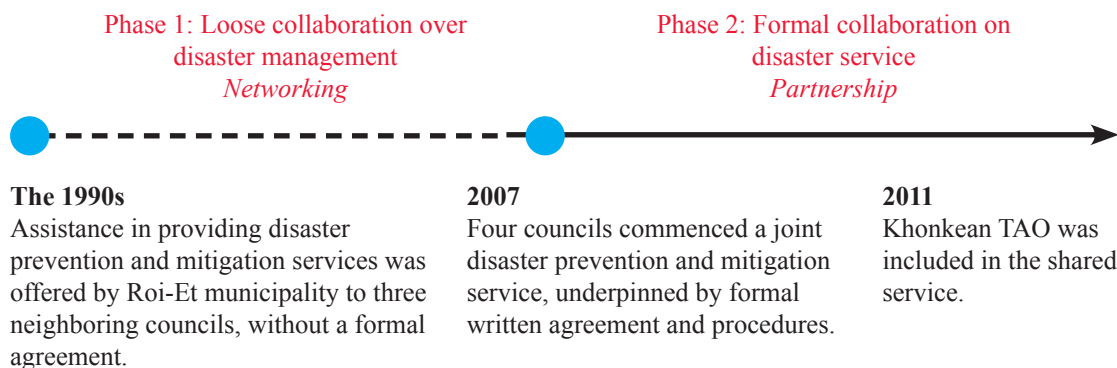

Figure 1. The chronology of inter-local government collaboration in Roi-Et from the 1990s onwards.

Table 6

The Population, Area, and Revenue of Lower-Tier Local Governments That Work Together With Roi-Et Province in 2009

Name	Area (km²)	Population	Source of revenue			Total revenue (million baht)
			Locally collected revenues (million baht)	Centrally collected taxes for local government (million baht)	Grants (million baht)	
Roi-Et municipality	11.63	34,637	40.25	61.19	190.57	292.01
Donglan TAO	9.90	8,076	1.43	10.21	12.02	23.66
Robmuang TAO	28.25	16,621	1.77	18.56	19.12	39.45
Nua-muang TAO	29.25	19,505	4.44	20.65	18.63	43.73

Source: Department of Local Administration (2009)

One politician described the resource dependency and how the loose relationship that was based on verbal agreement operated. Roi-Et municipality had been in existence for 60 years, whereas the four TAOs had only been created in the mid to late 1990s. Therefore, Roi-Et municipality had more experience, capacity, and resources—namely, staff, money, and equipment—than the TAOs. Moreover, because it was located in the center, surrounded by neighboring councils, Roi-Et municipality had always been asked to help these councils control disasters when they occurred. Another politician said that Roi-Et municipality had to go out and offer assistance outside their territory, even though they were unsure who would foot the bill.

Phase 2: Formal Joint Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Service (2007 onwards)

After each TAO had relied on this loose institutional relationship with Roi-Et municipality for almost a decade, a formal, long-term joint disaster service between Roi-Et and neighboring TAOs was established in 2007. Roi-Et municipality would have been able to maintain its own position and continue delivering high-quality services without working in partnership with others, as it had sufficient capacity to manage disasters when they occurred. However, the informal relationship caused problems for Roi-Et because it had to deliver services outside its own territory without supporting legislation. It had never been clear how, and how much, Roi-Et could charge the TAOs for the service they provided. The presence of several

factors (namely, continued resource dependency and resource scarcity issues, the national government's shared service initiative, political support, and strong political leadership) enabled the mayor of Roi-Et to act as a collaborative entrepreneur and push for the formation of the shared service policy.

All respondents confirmed that continuity of resource dependency and scarcity issues was one of the significant forces resulting in the decision to form the joint disaster service. A politician of a TAO suggested that each TAO had very limited financial resources and that if they had made the investment required to operate these services alone, they would not have had enough money for other services. However, if they shared resources and were led by Roi-Et municipality, which had more money and a higher number of skilled workers, better service could be delivered in spite of the financial constraints they faced.

The presence of pre-existing shared services proposed by the national government was another significant factor that led to a change in regional relationships. In 2005, the mayor of Roi-Et applied to join the government's pilot project, realizing the government's project was an opportunity to persuade TAOs relying on Roi-Et municipality to become partners in a highly integrated partnership. Roi-Et's application was rejected. However, this project gave the mayor of Roi-Et the confidence to create a shared disaster service because the government promoted it. One politician said that the Department of Local Administration acknowledged that they were going

to do this. Thus, it was not going to be problematic. To sum up, this partnership arose from two factors: the problems they faced and the central government's agenda.

All respondents mentioned that the mayor of Roi-Et municipality was a strong political leader, another factor that led to the establishment of joint services. Although Roi-Et was not selected to be involved in the study or receive support from the national government, the mayor still had a keen interest in forming a highly integrated collaboration and acted as a collaborative entrepreneur. The mayor wished to implement the national government's idea, as it would adequately deal with the resource scarcities and dependencies that existed. Furthermore, such an arrangement would lead to improved disaster management for citizens in the long-run. One respondent said that the mayor "did not give up because he saw it as a great opportunity to fix the long-term issue." Another respondent said,

I applied for the project but got rejected. Anyway, I had seen the model implemented in Kanchanaburi supported by government and I was so sure it was going to work for our case. So, I thought it's time to move on, no matter what happens. Actually, we [Roi-Et municipality] can work alone, but we wanted to help them increase their capacity. Working together will improve disaster services for our whole area so that people will receive a better service. That's why we formed a joint service.

A politician of a TAO confirmed

what brought us together was the mayor of Roi-Et, who partners trusted. His leadership was key. In other areas, the political leader's concern might be to survive individually. They might think about their own territory, but the leader in our areas didn't.

Then, between 2005 and 2007, political leaders and officers from the four councils visited Kanchanaburi, which had implemented a joint disaster prevention and mitigation service that was supported by the Department of Local Administration. These visits were fairly regular, as they wanted to learn how the collaboration was designed and implemented. They

saw that prior to becoming a partner in the joint disaster management service, each council must gain approval from its councilors.

After the emergence of national government proposals for shared service provision, resource dependency and scarcity issues, and ongoing political support, the mayor of Roi-Et municipality, the strong political leader, grasped this opportunity to form a joint disaster service. He took on the role of a collaborative entrepreneur by convincing three neighboring councils, which always asked for help, to become partners in a formal arrangement. As all dependent councils need to continually access key resources controlled by Roi-Et, they agreed to such an arrangement. Consequently, in 2007, a joint disaster prevention and mitigation service between the four neighboring councils was established. As a senior officer in one TAO explained:

at that time, this council did not even have a fire engine. Many TAOs did not have adequate firefighting equipment and lacked suitable skills and knowledge to effectively provide such a service, whereas Roi-Et municipality was a powerful council. This led us to think working alone was not an option anymore. We needed to deepen the relationship with others, especially with Roi-Et municipality, so that long-term benefits could be achieved.

Regarding the governance structure of the joint service, a virtual organization where partners can work together was created. This form of collaboration can be conceptualized as a partnership; it is a highly integrated collaboration constituted by an MOU, which sets out the terms of a 3-year relationship. The MOU outlines a commitment made by partners to align activities and pool resources, namely, finance, staff, and equipment. It also outlines the respective goal of collaboration as "enhancing the local governments' capacity in providing disaster service so that the quality of life of people in this area will be increased and their security will be ensured" (Collaborating Centre for Shared Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Service in Roi-Et, 2013, p. 3). The governance arrangement is overseen by two bodies, the Fire Joint Executive Committee and the working group.

The Executive Joint Committee is an upper-tier key decision-making mechanism responsible for setting policy and direction for joint working arrangements,

consistent with the argument that shared decision making is a basic requirement in collaboration (Houge, 1993). The councilors on the executive committee are the mayor, the chief executive, the political member's representatives, and the resident representatives of each partnering council, chaired by the mayor of the leading council. The working group is responsible for the operational level. Its members are comprised of the fire section chief and the chief of the office of partnering councils.

Two approaches have been used to share resources. First, each partner directly pays equal amounts of money to a single fund managed by the Centre for Shared Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Service, except for Roi-Et municipality which, as the leading council, pays more than the others. Roi-Et municipality also acts as the host and manages the fund. The pooled money has been used to purchase equipment and train staff across all councils so that they engage in similar working practices.

Along with this approach, each council retains responsibility for the disaster prevention and mitigation service in-house and continue to employ staff to deliver disaster services for their own area. The staffs are, however, trained together and go out to respond to disasters on behalf of the Centre for Shared Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Service when requested by the partners. Additionally, each council still has to spend money on key equipment to deliver disaster services in their own territories. Essentially, in the joint-meeting, the partners consider their budgets and align their activities in support of a shared disaster management plan, which is delivered using the resources of each partner. For example, although all partners can use the shared resources, such as equipment and staff, an interviewee mentioned that a council had been told by the committee to purchase a fire engine for using in its own area, instead of always waiting for help from the partners, which might be too late to control fire (cite source here). In 2012, Khonkaen TAO applied to join the shared service. Since then, there have been five councils providing joint disaster service in this area.

We can see from the above that the development of cross-council collaboration reflected an unbalanced relationship between the small TAO councils, which lacked resources, and the larger municipality council, which had more resources. In this case, there was a powerful council that had more capacity

and that controlled critical scarce resources that other small councils needed to fulfill their roles. Put more succinctly, Roi-Et municipality had greater capacity and resources to deliver disaster prevention and mitigation in Roi-Et. At the beginning of their collaboration, each mayor of the small councils lacked key resources—finance, qualified staff, equipment, and so on—and created an interpersonal relationship with the mayor of the powerful council by asking for permission to use their resources without any written agreement. This loose institutional relationship was driven by the self-interest of each individual council to address the resource constraints that they faced. For instance, the Roi-Et municipality faced problems helping smaller councils deliver disaster services outside its territory without legal support. Viewed this way, the larger councils became locked-in to a disadvantageous relationship, controlled by the small councils. This form of collaboration was facilitated by cultural norms in Thai society and the Thai local government system, in which the "big brother" council is expected to help smaller, "new-born" councils.

The larger council, in this case, could decide to end the institutional relationship and work independently. However, the mayor there chose to strengthen the relationship. Data showed that they exercised their power by convincing the smaller councils to enter into a formalized collaborative partnership. On the one hand, they needed to mitigate problems facing the lack of written agreement caused them. On the other, the mayor of the larger council perceived himself as a big brother, who had the responsibility to help the smaller new-born councils.

Moreover, shared service was perceived by the leader of the larger council as a productive mechanism for more effective use of scarce resources and provide better services for the wider community beyond its territory. Due to this mixture of both self-interest and altruism, the leader acted as a collaborative entrepreneur to push for the government's pre-existing proposals for shared services to becoming policy. This led to a step-change in which highly structured and formalized collaboration and shared disaster prevention and mitigation services in Roi-ET were established. For those small councils, entering into the formalized collaboration required them to pay more money than the previous, looser institutional relationship. However, they were willing to become partners because playing this cross-council collaboration game enabled them

to address resource constraints and secure long-term access to key resources controlled by the larger council.

Discussion

To link back to previous studies, the results from the survey confirm the validity of findings in a number of studies on inter-local collaboration (e.g., Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Blair & Janousek, 2013; Krueathep et al., 2010; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). In particular, the survey confirms that resource scarcity and dependency are the key factors influencing the decision of local governments to collaborate in the first place and to deepen their relationship over time. Collaborations are formed so that essential resources vital to their survival and growth could be secured.

However, the qualitative data-analysis provides additional insights and forces us to rethink the existing theory. To begin with, collaboration could be asymmetrical, as one council could control critical scarce resource upon which others are dependent. In this regard, the motivation to collaborate is uneven. In the beginning, small councils lacking resources and capacity chose to rely on the larger, controlling council in pursuit of survival, resulting in temporary networking without a written formal agreement. This transformed into a more formal, institutionalized collaborative arrangement because of the action of the mayor in the larger council and the emergence of national government proposals for shared services. As the mayor of the larger council perceived himself to be a big brother, shaped by particular cultural norms and found himself locked-in by the smaller councils, he encouraged small councils dependent upon his council to become partners in shared services. It was believed that this would fix problems caused by the previously loose, informal institutional relationship and lead to better allocation of shared resources and improvements to service provision across the entire area. All these reflect the embedded influence of socio-cultural conditions on inter-local collaboration.

The role of socio-culture confirms the argument that "each collaboration is set in its own local context, and will be subject to particular influences as a result" (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002, p. 116). Thus, the missing focus so far is to look at how cultural norms shape collaboration. In this vein, the influence of socio-cultural conditions in the Thai context forces us to reconsider existing theories on collaboration. The lessons from Thailand tell us that exchange theory, which stresses the importance of equal relationships, cannot always explain how collaboration works because asymmetrical relations shaped by socio-cultural conditions can also drive collaboration. In the West (e.g., England), several cases demonstrate successful cross-council collaboration characterized by an equal relationship between small local governments in the same lower tier but cooperation between lower and upper tier is identified as problematic (Chamchong, 2016). This is exactly what exchange theory tells us. However, collaboration in the Thai case was characterized by an asymmetric relationship between a larger and smaller council in the same lower tier, facilitated by the strong hierarchical social system that makes up the Thai culture.

On the other hand, the lessons from Thailand also allow us to rethink resource dependency theory. The theory assumes that those with fewer resources are dependent on those organizations with more resources (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). However, the lessons from Thailand show that the reverse also applies. Councils with more resources and who control necessary scarce resources that other councils need to fulfill can become locked-in to an uneven and disadvantageous relationship. This relationship is controlled by those councils with fewer resources. This unequal cross-council relationship is enabled by a lack of written, formal agreement to govern the relationship and by cultural norms prevalent in Thai society. In the Thai local government system, larger councils with more resources are expected to help smaller, more recently formed councils that have limited capacity and resources.

Conclusion

This study shows that asymmetric relationships within the context of inter-local collaboration can be successful, as they might be facilitated by a hierarchical system in a particular cultural context. It shows that small councils frequently preferred partnering with bigger councils because such partnership allowed them access to critical resources controlled by the powerful municipalities. In contrast, they seem unwilling to cooperate with each other because they perceive that they each have limited capacity and resources. Vertical

relationships are shaped by a strong hierarchical system that plays a central role in Thai culture that encourages those with a higher social status to help those with lower social status. These various factors had an impact on the development of inter-local collaboration. Therefore, having a powerful leading council that perceived itself as a big brother was a significant enabling factor in encouraging collaboration in the Thai context. Horizontal, equal collaboration between TAOs themselves seems unlikely to happen because they lack confidence in each other.

It is not claimed here that asymmetric relationships are always good, but rather, we should not ignore the socio-cultural conditions underpinning inter-local collaboration. Thus, we would need to move beyond simply focusing our analysis on legal-institutional conditions, as many studies have done so far. As Sullivan (2014) argued, collaboration is now "the new normal" in public policy and practice. We need to think more expansively about the places, spaces, and scales of collaboration in our pursuit of new knowledge. Thus, she proposed that further study should draw attention to a number of underexplored concepts and neglected elements underpinning collaboration. With her framework, three dimensions—political, material, and cultural—are taken into more serious consideration, meaning that the role of ideas, rules, and emotions are particularly important. She argued thatthe challenge for policy makers in all this is to understand collaboration, in terms of mood, practice and instrument where the role of power, interests, structure and agency are central to making sense of policy processes.This study would add that further research should seek to examine and interpret the silent and embedded impacts of socio-culture that exist in particular contexts on our understanding of collaboration.

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Declaration of ownership

This report is my original work.

Conflict of interest

None.

Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the institution.

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