

A Policy Paper
On

**The Roles of the Social Development and Human Security
Volunteers (SDHSV) and Asymmetric Relationships with the
Government in Social Protection Governance in Northeastern
Thailand**

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Introduction

This paper offers insights collected from three workshops organised in July 2023 in three provinces in Northeast Thailand, namely Sakhrui District, Nongkhai Province, Muang District, Yasothon Province, and Chiangkhan District, Loei Province. The workshops were designed to be a discussion forum for civil society, namely the Social Development and Human Security Volunteers (SDHSV), who were village volunteers and served as a crucial link between the government (the service provider) and the target poor and vulnerable people (the beneficiaries of the social protection programmes) at the local level. The number of volunteer participants was 33 in total. The workshops were parts of the continuing project, which engaged in the research onto the poor and vulnerable people's perspective on their insecurities in 2021, and the workshop discussed the current situation and plausible improvement among local government officials responsible for delivery of social protection schemes in 2022. Information from all participants would fill a gap of an understanding on a practical side of social protection programs, especially that from a perspective of local societal actors, who are closely involved with the poor and vulnerable groups.

In the workshops, the SDHSV participants shared experiences and reviews on the current policy implementation and service provision, including success and limitation at the grassroots level. Three main objectives were held as the followings.

1. To share and reflect on the findings from previous projects with representatives from the civil society;
2. To identify “Pain Points” of the current social protection schemes; and
3. To suggest potential social protection interventions (or solution propositions) to improve the poor and vulnerable people’s access to government programmes.

The three objectives were turn into the discussion agendas at the workshops. To show the sequence of activities, the workshops were first to offer an opportunity for the researcher to share information gathered from the vulnerable population and government officials, with the SDHSV participants. Then, field information and experiences, both positive and negative, especially on key pain points of the current social protection schemes were to constructively exchange among the village volunteer participants as a learning approach to service delivery success and practical solutions to problems at hands. In essence, these exchanged information and experiences would significantly contribute to the ultimate objective of this project, which was a clearer understanding about the implementation of social protection programmes of which, until recently, lacked enriched empirical knowledge and inclusive local perspectives from the northeastern region of Thailand. This paper presents the key findings from the workshops on the roles of SDHSVs and their challenges as well as potential areas of improvements in the following sections respectively.

The Role of Social Development and Human Security Volunteers (SDHSV) in Social Protection

Social protection required multi-stakeholder collaboration since is a complex challenge that requires a diversity of expertise, resources, and perspectives. In Thailand, social protection encompasses of three broad policy and programme types including social insurance, social assistance, and labour market interventions. The set of policies and programs, both targeted and universal oriented, is intended to decrease poverty and vulnerability through encouraging effective labour markets, reducing the risks of vulnerable people, and promoting their capacity to protect themselves against risks and overcoming difficulties.¹ In essence, the key roles of social

¹ Carter, Becky, Keetie Roelen, Sue Enfield, and William Avis. "Social protection topic guide." (2019).; Fiszbein, Ariel, Ravi Kanbur, and Ruslan Yemtsov. "Social protection and poverty reduction: Global patterns and some targets." *World Development* 61 (2014): 167-177; Niño-Zarazúa, Miguel. "Welfare and redistributive effects of social assistance in the Global South." *Population and Development Review* 45 (2019): 3-22.; Niño-Zarazúa, Miguel, and Alma Santillán Hernández. "The political economy of social protection adoption." (2021): 520-535.

protection are to reduce poverty, decrease inequality, and lessen risk and vulnerability. Examples of programmes in the social insurance category are Civil Servant Pension Program, the Government Pension Fund (GPF), and Social Security Fund (SSF), in the social assistance category are State Welfare Card Program, Old Age Allowance, Child Subsidy to Poor Households, school feeding programs, and etc, and in the labour market program category are Unemployment Benefit in Social Security Fund (SSF), National Village and Urban Community Fund (1-million Baht Village Fund), Welfare Card Jobs Training Program, and People with Disabilities (PWD) employment tax incentives.² These social protection programs are deployed accordingly at various times and stages.

Governance networks³ in the context of social protection is about the collaborative and interconnected relationships between various stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and management of social protection programs in order to respond effectively to the needs of the population and to promote inclusiveness and democratic accountability in the public governance arena. These stakeholders often include government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, community-based organizations, international donors, and private sector entities. Networks of these stakeholders are often formed to achieve a variety of objectives, which can be broad and diverse. These objectives may include information sharing, resource pooling, and cooperation for mutual benefit. Governance networks of social protection programs can thus enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and inclusivity of these initiatives, leading to better outcomes for the most vulnerable and marginalized populations. However, it also requires careful coordination, communication, and trust-building among the various stakeholders involved to achieve its full potential.

The role of civil society is of paramount importance in a well-functioning and democratic society for several reasons. Civil society actors are often at the forefront of *advocating* for social, political, and economic change. They can raise awareness, mobilize public opinion, and press for reforms to address pressing issues such as human rights, environmental protection, and social justice. *Checks and balances* are the vital roles of civil society. By monitoring the actions of government

² More details on all available programmes see ILO, UNICEF, IOM, and UN Women. “Thailand Social Protection Diagnostic Review”. June 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/thailand/reports/thailand-social-protection-diagnostic-review-0>.

³ More theoretical discussions see Klijn, Erik Hans, and Joop Koppenjan. *Governance networks in the public sector*. Routledge, 2015.; Sørensen, Eva, and Jacob Torfing, eds. *Theories of democratic network governance*. Springer, 2016.; Baehler, Karen J., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Governance and Public Management for Social Policy*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

and other institutions, civil society actors help ensure accountability and prevent abuses of power. In governance era, *service provision* is no longer the executive task of the state. many civil society actors, such as non-profits and charities, play a crucial role in providing essential services to communities. This can include healthcare, education, disaster relief, and support for marginalized or vulnerable populations. Civil society represents *a diverse range of interests and perspectives* in society. They give voice to the needs and concerns of various groups, ensuring that policymaking takes into account the welfare of all citizens. Civil society can serve as a space for *experimentation and innovation* in addressing social challenges. They can develop and pilot new solutions that governments may later adopt. Civil society can serve as *a bridge between citizens and government*, facilitating dialogue and cooperation. This is particularly important in participatory democracies. Civil society organizations foster a sense of *community and social cohesion* by bringing people together around shared goals and values. During crises, civil society organizations can provide *rapid response and relief efforts*, complementing government responses. Civil society can be a *capacity building* mechanism. Civil society can strengthen the capacity of communities to advocate for their rights and needs and can provide training and education to empower individuals. In short, civil society plays a crucial role in promoting democratic values, protecting rights, addressing social issues, and ensuring a more inclusive and equitable society. Its contributions are integral to the functioning of vibrant, participatory democracies and the advancement of social progress.

Village volunteers - the Social Development and Human Security Volunteers (SDHSVs), are civil society actors at the centre of interest in this paper. Civil society's role in social protection is crucial for ensuring that these programmes are inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable. They can play a vital role in advocacy, monitoring, service delivery, and innovation, helping to create a more just and equitable programme development and implementation. Particularly in times of crises such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, village volunteers are the important actors and served as a mechanism of public service delivery.⁴ The SDHSVs are often referred to as "community development volunteers", play a vital role in addressing social challenges and promoting sustainable development, especially the works of Ministry of Social Development and Human Security (MSDHS), which is a Thai government

⁴ Virakul, Busaya, Chartchai Na Chiangmai, and Kalayanee Senasu. "Thailand and COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned, challenges, and the silver linings." In *Community, Economy and COVID-19: Lessons from Multi-Country Analyses of a Global Pandemic*, pp. 505-530. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022.; Doungphummes, Nuntiya, Napawan Tantivejakul, and Nitida Sangsingkeo. "Thai village health volunteers' employment of self-directed learning and collective power in time of pandemic." *Social Work with Groups* 46, no. 3 (2023): 264-277.

body responsible for the oversight of Social Development and Human Security and the SDHSVs. These volunteers are citizens, who are based in the area, have a good understanding of the social issues in the area, and join as Social Development and Human Security Volunteers to help the target groups according to the mission of the MSDHS that are children, youth, women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and those in need. There are currently 332,551 registered as SDHSVs nationwide.

Responsibilities of village volunteers may encompass a wide range of activities involved quality of life of target citizens in areas of community development, healthcare support, educational initiatives, environmental conservation, disaster response, and access to welfare programmes. According to Ministry of Social Development and Human Security Regulations, B.E. 2564 regarding Social Development and Human Security Volunteers, Section 3, Article 26, the broad roles of SDHSVs are as followings.

(1) Adhere to the policies of all agencies under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

(2) Search for, identify, monitor, and provide information and a list of individuals facing social issues to the agencies under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security for consideration of assistance according to the ministry's mission.

(3) Provide guidance and counselling on social issues, coordinate, monitor, and suggest assistance methods to individuals facing distress, provide services, and carry out activities to protect the rights of target groups in line with the missions of all agencies under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security or relevant laws, regulations, and guidelines.

(4) Promote social welfare at all levels and engage in activities related to social and human security development to monitor, prevent, address, and improve the quality of life, in line with the specific conditions of each area.

(5) Promote social participation and develop networks in social development.

(6) Coordinate and support the activities of local administrative organizations in missions related to social welfare and social development.

(7) Publicise public relations, conduct campaigns, disseminate information and news related to social development, and promote public access to the rights and mission of the ministry.

(8) Study and self-improve, participate in activities organized by agencies under the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, and/or promote and support their operations.

(9) In the case of performing duties in foreign countries, at least adhere to (1) - (8), as well as international laws and local laws in the respective countries.

In addition, the SDHSVs have the right to receive budgetary support and reimbursement for expenses in carrying out duties and responsibilities according to the regulations and announcements of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, with the approval of the Comptroller General's Department. The financial supports are not the monthly compensations but to support budgetary allocations for the implementation of various projects/activities of SDHSVs in the area, in accordance with actual expenses.

Challenges of Social Development and Human Security Volunteers (SDHSV) in Social Protection: The Asymmetrical Relationships between the government and the SDHSV

The information gathered from the workshops showed imbalance of power and resources in the relationship between the government and the SDHSV in the Northeast. The SDHSV's responsibilities are often controlled and monitored by the government superiors in a top-down fashion. These volunteers are typically individuals or community members who contribute their time and effort to support social development and human security initiatives. In contrast, the government represents the state's authority and resources. The followings are key characteristics of this asymmetrical relationship identified by the workshop participants.

1. The lack of recognition: The majority of the public are often not aware of information about SDHSVs. Lacking recognition from public members and especially local government agencies in social protection networks can be a significant challenge found in the Northeast. Recognition is essential for building trust, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that the contributions of individual volunteers or organizations are acknowledged and valued. When recognition is lacking, it can lead to several issues:

- **Diminished Motivation and Reduced Commitment:** Some SDHSVs become demotivated when their efforts go unnoticed or unappreciated. This can lead to decreased engagement and a sense of disconnection from the goals of social protection networks.

A lack of recognition can also result in decreased commitment to the SDHSVs' objectives. Volunteers may not feel invested in the success of social protection networks. As discussed in the workshop, the number of proactive SDHSVs tends to be extremely small despite the large number of registered SDHSVs (332,551) in the system of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. More importantly, when individual contributions are not recognized, the social protection network may lose out on valuable expertise and innovative ideas that members could bring to the table.

- **Conflict and Resentment:** Unacknowledged efforts can lead to tension and conflicts within the social protection network, as SDHSVs may feel that their work is undervalued. In the workshops in Sakhray District, Nongkhai Province, the SDHSVs reported that they were often not welcomed in public discussions on social protection by the local government and community leaders or were not allowed to carry out their responsibilities according to the ministerial regulations. This led to hostility in the social protection networks and weakened collaboration. Effective collaboration often depends on trust and a sense of mutual respect. Without recognition, collaboration may become less effective or even break down.

2. Unclear roles: The roles and responsibilities of SDHSVs are not clear. Despite the roles of SDHSV mentioned above, the information gathered from the workshops shows that the most common SDHSV's responsibilities in practice are often limited to identifying and monitoring the target groups by surveying the issues and screening the target groups; providing initial assistance such as information or counselling; and referring to relevant agencies for further assistance.

3. Resource Disparity: Governments typically have significantly more resources, both in terms of funding and expertise, than volunteers. The SDHSVs often rely on limited resources and face challenges in implementing initiatives effectively. As the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security provides only limited financial supports, the SDHSVs' fieldworks often required personal funds for document preparation, internet services, and travel costs. This create frustration and exclusion of volunteers who are not better-off. In addition to the economic status, the capacity of volunteers is crucial for task completion. Many SDHSVs have less digital literacy and skills, and less sufficient information in comparison to government officials who typically have access to a wider range of information, data, and expertise. Volunteers lack access to such resources, which can limit their ability to make informed decisions. Governments can offer training and capacity-building programs to volunteers, which can enhance their effectiveness.

4. Decision-Making Authority and Policy Influence: Government agencies have the authority to make decisions on policies, resource allocation, and programme design. However, the SDHSVs have limited influence over these decisions, as they often operate at the local or community level. They work under regulatory control of the government rules and regulations that govern volunteer activities and programs. This regulatory control is likely to affect the autonomy and flexibility of volunteer initiatives. Also, while volunteers may have valuable insights into local needs and community dynamics, they may have limited influence on the development and modification of national or regional social policies.

Despite these asymmetries, the relationship between the government and the SDHSVs to some extent can be mutually beneficial. Volunteers contribute local knowledge, community engagement, and a grassroots perspective that can inform and complement government policies and programmes. Government agencies benefit from the dedication and community-level insight that volunteers bring to the table.

Efforts to address the asymmetries in this relationship include improved communication and collaboration, increased training and capacity-building opportunities for volunteers, and the establishment of mechanisms for volunteers to participate in decision-making processes at higher levels of government. Ultimately, a more balanced and constructive relationship can lead to more effective, responsive, and inclusive social policy initiatives.

Potential Improvements on the role of SDHSVs in Social Protection

Civil society can often play a crucial role in advocating for democratic accountability in social protection. Democratic accountability in social protection is fundamental to ensure that social safety nets are responsive to the needs of the population, that they are not subject to corruption or misuse of funds, and that they contribute to reducing poverty and inequality. It upholds the principles of transparency, participation, and accountability that are essential in democratic societies. In accordance with the principle of democratic accountability, the role of SDHSVs can be significantly enhanced in several ways, as followings.

1. **Advocacy for Social Inclusion:** SDHSVs can advocate for the rights and well-being of marginalized and vulnerable populations. They can raise awareness about the importance

of social protection and push for policies that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of these groups.

2. **Monitoring and Accountability:** SDHSVs can act as a watchdog, monitoring the implementation of social protection programmes to ensure they are effectively reaching the intended beneficiaries. This oversight helps hold governments and other stakeholders accountable for programme outcomes and expenditures.
3. **Community Engagement and Empowerment:** SDHSVs can engage with local communities to raise awareness about their entitlements and assist individuals in accessing social protection services. They empower communities to be active participants in the design and evaluation of programmes.
4. **Innovative Solutions:** SDHSVs can develop innovative approaches to address gaps in social protection, drawing from their grassroots experience and understanding of local contexts. They can pilot new initiatives and advocate for their scaling up if successful.
5. **Research and Data Collection:** SDHSVs can be part of the Offices of Academic Promotion and Support, the research and development departments of Ministry of Social Development and Human Security that conduct annual research and gather data on social protection issues, providing valuable insights for policymakers and programme designers to make evidence-based decisions.
6. **Bridge Between Government and Beneficiaries:** SDHSVs can serve as intermediaries between government agencies and programme beneficiaries, ensuring that communication is effective and responsive to local needs.
7. **Initial Assistance:** SDHSVs can provide initial aid to individuals who face challenges in accessing their entitlements, helping people navigate bureaucratic hurdles and ensuring their rights are protected.
8. **Emergency Relief and Crisis Response:** During crises, SDHSVs are often among the first to respond, providing immediate relief and support to those affected by disasters, conflicts, or economic downturns.
9. **Promotion of Social Cohesion:** By advocating for social protection and equitable policies, SDHSVs contribute to social cohesion and the reduction of inequalities, which can lead to more stable and harmonious societies.
10. **Advocacy for Policy Reforms:** SDHSVs can push for policy reforms to expand the coverage, adequacy, and accessibility of social protection programmes, based on the evolving needs of society.

In summary, SDHSVs' role in social protection is crucial for ensuring that social protection programs are inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable. They can play a vital role in advocacy, monitoring, service delivery, and innovation, helping to create a more just and equitable society. Equally important, their contributions deserve to be recognised and their roles should be more empowered by creating a culture of appreciation within the network where members acknowledge each other's contributions and providing opportunities for members to share their experiences and successes with the network. Furthermore, consensus on processes and goals of social protection policies must be built among government agencies and SDHSVs. As suggested by Klijn & Koppenjan, “in dealing with substantive complexities, network management is aimed at continuously enhancing joint image building and cross-frame learning during interaction processes, in order to uncover or develop ‘common grounds’ which – despite the existence of varying perceptions, objectives, and preferences – enable the realization of joint solutions and co-produced services” (p.127).⁵

⁵ Klijn, Erik Hans, and Joop Koppenjan. *Governance networks in the public sector*. Routledge, 2015.