"Public Sphere" and the Constructing of Strong Communities

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Abstract

Background and Aims: The term 'Öffentlichkeit' or 'Public Sphere' is a German concept used to elucidate the societal development of public consciousness. However, an examination of successful community problem-solving initiatives in Thailand reveals that the 'public sphere' plays a critical and dynamic role in fostering the success of community problem-solving. It serves as a crucial arena for pursuing consensus through deliberative democracy, facilitating the process of reaching agreements that contribute to resolving community challenges. This article presents the results of a research study on 'Public Sphere' stemming from a spatial readiness analysis.

Methodology: The action plan involves organizing a forum to explain the research project, holding group discussions, conducting in-depth interviews with individuals involved or playing significant roles in driving community-strengthening processes, and meeting with provincial subgroups to advance provincial development.

Results: Structured around four key topics, the article discusses: 1. The Construction of Strong Communities as a Foundation of Thai Democracy Development; 2. Utilizing the 'Public Sphere' as a Tool and Mechanism to Establish the Foundation of Thai Democracy; 3. Self-management practices in Successful Strong Communities across Various Regions; 4. Guidelines for Constructing the 'Public Sphere' to Cultivate Strong Communities. Each of these topics will be elaborated upon in the following sections."

Conclusion: The article's main goal appears to be to examine how strengthening communities and creating a vibrant "Public Sphere" are essential to the advancement of Thai democracy. The text underscores the importance of community self-management practices and guides fostering an inclusive 'Public Sphere' to fortify Thai society's democratic foundation.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy; Public Sphere; Thai Democracy; Strong Communities; Oeffentlichkeit

Introduction

The concept of democracy at the modern local community level advocates for the decentralization of power and responsibility from the central government to the grassroots level, encompassing villages, sub-districts, municipalities, districts, or cities. The primary objective is to ensure that residents of each local community reap the maximum benefits from this decentralization process. Modern local democracy transcends mere electoral processes for representatives or leaders of local government bodies. It necessitates empowering local communities and their members to actively participate in policymaking, determining their community's circumstances, and engaging directly in decision-making processes that genuinely impact them at the local level.

This democratic approach is founded on the belief that quality democracy at the local level fosters increased political participation among citizens. Enhanced political engagement leads to the creation of robust local communities and sustainable development. Democracy at the local community level can be viewed as a form of direct democracy, supporting the notion of "the people governing themselves." This concept originates from the idea of bottom-up democracy, which encourages community members to play a pivotal role in shaping the future of their localities. It rejects the notion of unilateral decision-making by the central government or officials at various levels. Strong direct democracy grants individuals greater power and opportunities for self-governance. As Mahatma Gandhi famously stated, "A good government system cannot replace self-government." Direct democracy not only empowers communities but also reinforces their resilience. It helps safeguard the unique way of life in local communities from the influence of capitalist systems and corrupt political powers. In essence, direct democracy preserves the autonomy and identity of local communities, ensuring they are not undermined by external forces.

Strong local community democracy not only enhances governance at the grassroots level but also fortifies democracy nationally. Fostering political engagement among residents in diverse localities advances society toward genuine democracy. As the saying goes, "The heart of democracy beats through the political participation of every citizen." Active political involvement fosters a civic culture

where individuals are vigilant and hold state power and capital groups accountable. This cultivates honesty and transparency in the political system, prompting local government entities to provide vital services and infrastructure tailored to community needs.

In essence, the concept of democracy at the modern local community level aims to decentralize power, empowering residents to shape policymaking and determine their community's trajectory. This nurtures the growth of resilient and sustainable local communities. Wide-ranging political participation is pivotal, as politically engaged citizens are instrumental in ensuring integrity and transparency in governance. Thriving local communities contribute to the sustainability of national democracy.

Participation acts as a conduit between government bodies and civil society, reflecting evolving management ideologies. It is indispensable for ensuring that state power is wielded in alignment with the populace's needs and aspirations. Participation facilitates the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens among society members, fostering justice and well-being according to the Principle of Distributive Justice.

In this article, we delve into leveraging the Public Sphere to advance participatory democracy within the framework of Thai identity democracy, to bolster community resilience. Our exploration encompasses various facets, including establishing strong communities as the bedrock of Thai democracy development, utilizing the public sphere to lay the groundwork for Thai democracy, examining self-management practices in successful communities across diverse regions, and providing guidelines for nurturing robust communities through the public sphere.

1. The Construction of Strong Communities as a Foundation of Thai Democracy Development
1.1 Characteristics and the significance of local communities

Understanding the essence of "community" involves exploring diverse dimensions within academic contexts. In this discussion, we adopt a sociological perspective as introduced by Poplin, which delineates five significant characteristics of community (Phangngam, 2019): (1) Group of people living together in one geographic area, (2) Group members maintaining social interaction, (3) Group members having a social relationship, (4) Group members having a psycho-ecological relationship, and (5) Group members having central activities for utilization. Moreover, Poplin also identifies three statuses of communities: (1) Community as a territorial unit, (2) Community as a social system unit, and (3) Community as a psycho-cultural unit.

The term "local" originates from the Latin word "Localis," meaning place. Consequently, "local" refers to a specific place within a distinct district, forming part of the larger country. In the context of local administration, it signifies the administrative area determined by a given country. For instance, in some countries, local administration is categorized into towns, cities, and metropolitan areas. (Phangngam, 2019) The expression "local communities" is prevalent in European countries like Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands, where local administrative systems have evolved from the concept of "community." The primitive communities in these countries served as self-governing entities. (Phangngam, 2019)

Local communities hold significance in five key aspects (Phangngam, 2019): (1) Local communities shoulder certain duties and missions crucial for the existence of the larger community system, such as the responsibility for social refinement and the maintenance of family institutions; (2) Local communities serve as a valuable tool for reflecting people's opinions in society, functioning both as an official administrative unit (local government organization) and an unofficial unit (village monitoring by the head of the village or senior village members). This dual role gives them distinctive characteristics that provide access to the local population; (3) Local communities play a role in categorizing the benefits and needs of local people, simplifying the handling of various local demands; (4) Local communities constitute the fundamental unit of society in addressing trouble mitigation for residents; (5) Local communities function as institutions for practicing local participation, emphasizing their essential roles in the societal system. These roles not only impact the existence of the societal system but also promote political participation among residents.

1.2 Constructing strong communities and the self-management process

According to Paiboon Wattanasiritham, a strong community in Mai Rieang Community embodies self-reliance, self-management, and mutual care. In the realm of community development, a strong community signifies the promotion of processes that cultivate high-quality local individuals capable of supporting themselves in a self-reliant manner and effectively handling challenges independently. This approach fosters harmonious coexistence among community members. It serves as the cornerstone for nurturing strong relationships with natural resources, preserving traditions, upholding values, and fostering a sense of belonging within the local community. (Phangngam, 2019)

For a community to embark on self-management, the first crucial step is to cultivate a deep-seated belief in the potential of its people and community. This belief, rooted in the principle of self-reliance, serves as the foundation upon which effective self-management can be built. (Phangngam, 2019) Community self-management is the ability of local communities to address challenges, manage relationships, and navigate local affairs grounded in the freedom of thought, expression, and knowledge. This freedom fosters collective wisdom, a form of local intellect accumulated through the community's past experiences. (Phangngam, 2019)

The study conducted by Prapart Pintobtang et al., titled "The Development of Robust, Self-Reliant, and Adaptive Communities through Integration Practices," encompasses research in five provinces, with findings synthesized based on the unique conditions of each area. The results indicate that the establishment of a model area for robust, self-reliant, and adaptive community development, through integration practices, is manifested in the local community's operations. This operational approach contributes significantly to the success of community problem-solving, with six key points identified (Pintobtang et al., 2022): (1) the communal visualization of changes among community members; (2) the institutional co-management; (3) processes involving knowledge management, knowledge participation, and knowledge application; (4) consensus on management decisions; (5) the roles of civil society as partners in community development; and (6) the construction of a "public sphere" or "deliberative sphere".

The study demonstrates a consensus among communities, community organizations, and civil society to establish a "public sphere" for addressing conflicts in resource management and developmental inequities. These complex issues are challenging to resolve independently by any single community or organization. The aim is to provide a platform for stakeholders involved in the issues to engage in discussions and debates based on public and community benefits. Additionally, the "public sphere" serves as a forum to explore options and innovations for new development, fostering collaborative solutions to intricate problems. (Pintobtang et al., 2022) The establishment of the "public sphere" serves as the mechanism and foundational tool for constructing resilient, self-managed communities. The subsequent section will delve into the concept of the "public sphere," exploring its meaning, framework, and functions.

2. Utilizing the "Public Sphere" as a Tool and Mechanism to Establish the Foundation of Thai Democracy

The concept of the "public sphere" has evolved based on the collective experiences of local communities in diverse geographical locations, serving as a synthesized model and guideline for its construction. Over time, it has transformed into a crucial mechanism for local problem-solving. The "public sphere" functions as a communal space where individuals can express their political participation and engage in local management. This section will delve into two sub-topics: 2.1 "Public Sphere" and Deliberative Democracy, and 2.2 Attempting to Construct the "Public Sphere" in Thai Society, outlined as follows.

2.1 "Public Sphere" and Deliberative Democracy

The "public sphere" or "public space" stands as a pivotal component of deliberative democracy, functioning as a platform for expressing endeavors to address issues or rectify deficiencies inherent in representative democracy. This section will explore the intricate relationship between the "public sphere" and deliberative democracy. The term "Oeffentlichkeit" or "Public Sphere" has been in use since the 18th century, rooted in the German term "Oeffentlichkeit," signifying the public. Initially, the

term denoted a space or boundary allowing free access for the public, often associated with government missions. In the 19th century, while maintaining its original meaning, the term "public sphere" was first coined in connection with a group of people referred to in German as the "Publikum." (Gerhard & Neidhardt, 1990) The concept of the "public sphere" as commonly understood today draws its roots from the works of influential German scholars Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann. In his groundbreaking work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Habermas explores the emergence of public consciousness, tracing its origins to the increased expression of individual thoughts and the application of knowledge logically and openly. This intellectual ferment led to the public's expanding access to a sphere once closely monitored and controlled by the state. Over time, this sphere evolved into a space for open debate and critical engagement with politics and state power. The public sphere, in this sense, emerged as a countervailing force to the traditional power structures of European feudal society. The public sphere can be characterized as a battleground for political engagement, particularly for the middle class. Not only does the discourse within this sphere provide a channel for members of the society to participate in public affairs, but it also serves as a means to scrutinize the actions of the governing state. As a result, the group collectively derives conclusions from discussions or proposals, leveraging them in negotiations with the ruling class. Thus, the public sphere stands as an open platform through which the middle class can express themselves as "citizens" and unite to engage in public affairs. (Kooyai, 2013) Juergen Gerhard and Friedhelm Neidhardt delineated the three primary characteristics of the "Public Sphere" as follows (Gerhard & Neidhardt, 1990): (1) The communication system is distinctive and operates independently of other social systems, grounded in the exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups, and institutions on specific issues; (2) The unique communication system allows unrestricted access for members, emphasizing openness without limitations for any individuals. This openness is a fundamental condition for the establishment of the "public sphere." However, it is crucial to note that the "public sphere" is not devoid of limitations; rather, the key principle is the absence of inherent restrictions. Consequently, the "public sphere" is a system where definite members cannot be identified, as, in principle, everyone is permitted to participate; (3) The communication system is open to general individuals in society and caters to the commoners. This characteristic significantly influences information processing, functioning as an open system accessible to the public.

Deliberative Democracy, emerged roughly two decades ago and has spurred significant development in political theory. In a broad sense, deliberative democracy pertains to the concept of the law-making process involving public deliberation. From a legal perspective, deliberative democracy has instigated a more just legislative process, emphasizing the principles of participation and self-governance among citizens. In short, contemporary deliberative democracy is founded on the idea of political freedom, grounded in the practical reasoning of citizens. Joshua Cohen (1997) identifies five distinct characteristics of deliberative democracy: (Gerhard & Neidhardt, 1990) (1) Deliberative democracy operates on the principle that group members are committed to ongoing engagement without a predetermined endpoint; (2) Group members engage in the exchange of ideas on the assigned topic. This exchange is rooted in the commitment to realize the primary goal of the deliberations, guided by principles of freedom and equality; (3) Deliberative democracy entails the assembly of diverse individuals. Members exhibit diversity not only in their backgrounds but also in terms of satisfaction, confidence, and goals; (4) Members value the deliberation process as a means of achieving "legitimacy". The focus extends beyond the outcomes of the deliberation to encompass the righteousness of the process itself; (5) Members respect each other's ability to engage in logical discussions and accept the outcomes of these deliberations.

In addition to the characteristics of deliberative democracy, Joshua Cohen (1997) also outlines the principles that underpin the process of deliberative democracy: (Gerhard & Neidhardt, 1990) (1) The deliberation process must be "free" under two conditions – a) participants consider themselves bound solely by the results and preconditions of the deliberation. They are free from any authority of prior norms or requirements, and b) participants believe they can act on the decision made. The deliberative process is a sufficient reason to comply with the decision reached; (2) The deliberation process reveals "reasons" that members present to prompt state actions. These reasons, advocating for

their proposals, are grounded in the expectation that their proposed solutions can address relevant issues. Deliberation emphasizes that proposals should gain agreement through the deliberative process; (3) Participants in deliberation experience equality in two dimensions: formal and substantive. Formal equality requires the absence of substantive hierarchy, ensuring everyone is equal in the deliberative process—everyone can propose, criticize, and support measures. Substantive equality means participants are not limited or bound by specific distributions of power and resources. No individual holds power over others in the deliberative process.; (4) Deliberation aims at a rationally motivated consensus.

In conclusion, the characteristics and principles of deliberative democracy serve as essential tools for constructing the framework of the "public sphere" and fostering agreement within the civil society process.

2.2 Attempting to Construct the "Public Sphere" in Thai Society

The emergence of the "public sphere" or "public space" signifies a social process in modern society where individuals exchange ideas on public issues, culminating in demands placed on the governing state. This concept is integral to the democratic process. In Thailand, the development of democracy has encountered unique challenges distinct from Western societies. However, during the constitutional drafting process from 2014 to 2015, efforts were made to lay the groundwork for establishing a public sphere at the provincial level. This public sphere was referred to as the "Citizen Assembly," linked to citizen participation in local administration, as outlined in section 215.

"Individuals and communities within a locality possess the right to engage in the determination of local administrative patterns, the alteration of local administrative areas, administration, voting within the locality, or proposing local legislative acts, as stipulated by law.

Local government organizations are obligated to foster public participation by disclosing information, news, operational reports, financial reports, and financial status. Furthermore, these organizations must actively encourage Citizen Assembly and enable citizens to engage in decision-making processes for missions that can impact them, as stipulated by law.

To enhance people's participation as outlined in this section, citizens may assemble to form a Citizen Assembly, comprising a diverse group of local members tailored to the socio-geographic characteristics of each area. Citizens will collaborate with local administrative organizations to jointly administer missions, as specified in this legislative provision.

The components, qualifications, prohibited characteristics, sources, term of office, missions of the Citizen Assembly, and other pertinent matters shall be regulated as stipulated by the law."

The objective of forming "The Citizen Assembly" is to foster active citizens at the local level and promote the concept of a "public sphere" or "public space" as a mechanism for "Citizen Assembly" to effectively deliver services in response to community needs, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for a more participatory democracy. However, efforts to establish a foundation for a "public sphere" at the local administration level proved unsuccessful due to insufficient numbers of votes.

The process of decentralizing power within the Thai government through local administrative organizations and representative democracy, as a means to access power, reveals that ultimately, those who wield power in local administration are often from the local ruling class, marginalizing the commoners from political participation. This underscores a central issue in power decentralization in Thailand. Furthermore, the indirect political participation facilitated by local administrative organizations falls short of addressing the complex and diverse needs of each local community. In principle, "public sphere" and "deliberative democracy" are not antithetical to representative democracy; instead, they complement each other in the development of local democracy in Thailand. Deliberative democracy can address shortcomings in representative democracy, while the concept of the public sphere can be realized through the cultivation of active citizens engaged in civic life. The public sphere facilitates a process wherein people actively participate, offering advice and making demands on their representatives or the state for responsive action.

3. Self-Management Practices in Successful Strong Communities across Various Regions
In addressing this topic, two sub-topics are outlined as follows: 3.1) Strong Communities with Self-Management Practices in Different Issues; and 3.2) Strong Communities with Provincial-level Integration.

3.1 Strong Communities with Self-Management Practices in Different Issues
Communities can adopt self-management practices in various areas to address their specific challenges and needs. These practices can be categorized as follows (Phangngam, 2019): (1) Self-management in community finance; (2) Self-management in community planning; (3) Self-management in natural resources and environment; (4) Self-management in agriculture; (5) Self-management in sufficient economy; (6) Self-management in food security; (7) Self-management in poverty reduction. In his analysis, Kowit Phangngam identifies several factors that facilitate communities' ability to self-manage effectively. These factors include (Phangngam, 2019):

3.1.1 Three primary mechanisms driving self-management in local communities: (1) Leaders and volunteering members; (2) Group members; and (3) Community leaders council. An open platform is available for community residents to share ideas, engage in community activities aimed at addressing local issues, and provide a learning platform.

3.1.2 Principles of self-management for communities include the following: (1) Community democracy, emphasizing overall idea-sharing, deliberation, and debate; (2) Flexible administration; (3) Prompt action-taking; (4) Integrating all sectors for holistic development; (5) Assigning responsibilities at the community, zone, and neighborhood levels; (6) Utilizing community funds.

3.1.3 The process employed in self-management for communities comprises the following steps: (1) Robust and continuous group processes; (2) Auditing processes facilitated by networks in communities; (3) Knowledge transfer and exchange processes; (4) Continuous work processes; (5) Processes for mindset adjustment in communities to foster an appreciation of their values; and (6) Community participation processes.

3.1.4 The tools employed in self-management for communities are diverse and include: (1) Five Buddhist precepts; (2) Kinship system; (3) Village, village zones, blocks, and neighborhoods; (4) Community master plan; (5) Community groups/organizations or networks; (6) Clear regulations and rules; (7) Information system and information analysis.

3.1.5 Goals and outcomes arising from self-management for communities encompass (1) Emotional bonds with one's hometown; (2) A sense of love and protection for the community; (3) Self-reliance of the community; (4) Appropriate self-management patterns tailored to each community.

The findings from the study indicate that the construction of strong communities and the establishment of self-management necessitate factors and conditions that encourage and support communities in recognizing their values and potential for self-management. Appropriate measurements and mechanisms serve as essential tools to address this matter.

3.2 Strong Communities with Provincial-level Integration
The case study of Phang-nga Province illustrates the provincial integration model of a strong community under the project "Happiness of Phang-nga". The project can be summarized as follows.

3.2.1 The progression of the "Happiness of Phang-nga" initiative unfolded as follows (Faculty of Learning Sciences and Education, Thammasat University, July 2018): (1) The primary mechanism driving the public sector forward was the implementation of "community planning." This working process involved inviting local villagers to conduct a comprehensive review and gain an in-depth understanding of their community. This process served as the foundation for area development. Additionally, local villagers were empowered to learn how to manage the project's budget independently; (2) The establishment of community councils in 13 areas marked a significant shift in the civil sector in Phang-nga. Once these community councils were formed, the need for "public spheres" emerged, leading to meetings and discussions to drive the project's missions. These gatherings served as opportunities for increased collaboration and team building, attracting numerous new members to the project; (3) This phase provided the team with an opportunity to identify shared goals for the project. Members engaged in finding common needs among different sections and organizations,

as well as the needs of workers, to seamlessly connect the government sector, private sector, and community organizations. Adjustments in attitudes towards one another were crucial for establishing relationships with local sections. The proposal of a 10-topic strategic plan was also introduced, all rooted in the overarching concept of the "Happiness of Phang-nga."

        3.2.2 The pillars of success for the "Happiness of Phang-nga" Project encompass: (Faculty of Learning Sciences and Education, Thammasat University, July 2018) (1) Significantly reshaping mindsets and working processes was imperative, particularly as the working process needed to interface with both the government and private sectors. This required the working team to reform their attitudes, transitioning from merely demonstrating actions to building connections with organizations to propel their initiatives. Consequently, government organizations became more receptive, opening up to collaborative work with the team; (2) Cultivating understanding between the government sector, private sector, and civil society was achieved through a platform known as the "Citizen Council"; (3) Pioneering a social movement by promoting three essential skills: a) Developing new strategies for social initiatives, b) Implementing budget planning based on the principles of social entrepreneurship, c) Managing and developing teams during the transition period.

The inception of the "Happiness of Phang-nga" Project was initiated by Prof. Dr. Prawase Wasi and Mr. Pracha Hutanuwat. They recognized a crucial lesson from the civil society in Phang-nga, *the importance of building community strength from the grassroots while preserving its distinctive characteristics and integrity. It was observed that, regardless of changes in new provincial governors, the communities in Phang-nga were adept at adapting to change and collaborating effectively with new governance. The working concept of Phang-nga is deemed valuable and worthy of dissemination, serving as a model for other societies seeking to establish strong communities from their very foundations.* Presently, the Province of Phang-nga has put forth the "**Strategic Plan for Phang-nga Development**," (Strategic and Development Department of Phang-nga, n.d.) serving as a roadmap towards the central objective of "Happiness of Phang-nga." This process introduces a new dimension to the development process, enabling participation from every sector in the sharing of ideas and planning for developmental activities. The Strategic Plan for Phang-nga Development is therefore a significant phenomenon in the development model, attracting the collaboration of various sectors with the ultimate aim of promoting happiness for all.

4. Guidelines for Constructing the "Public Sphere" to Cultivate Strong Communities

To establish strong communities and cultivate a "public sphere" at the provincial level, it became crucial to develop tools that would support these endeavors. Following the unsuccessful constitutional votes to support these ideas in 2015, an effort was made to propose a draft within the Rules of the Office of the Prime Minister aimed at promoting strong communities. This proposal defined strong communities as "*those where residents can be self-reliant in their common ways of life by embracing the rights and duties of communities to develop themselves in terms of economics, society, local culture, cultural heritage, environmental quality, natural resources, biodiversity, healthcare, and the overall quality of life for local people. This is to be accomplished by the philosophy of sufficient economy and sustainable development, grounded in citizen collaboration, assistance, and self-reliance. The ultimate goal is to achieve happiness, good quality of life, and active participation in the country's development for everyone in these communities.*" The draft of the Office of the Prime Minister Rules aimed to: (Singkaneti, 2022)

(1) Establish mechanisms driving the country's social reformation towards creating peace, fairness, and equality, ultimately eradicating all forms of social inequality.

(2) Integrate grassroots-level reformation to encompass all aspects, including information systems, action plans, and relevant budgets. This involves promoting and supporting communities to participate in the preservation, revival, and promotion of local wisdom, culture, and tradition, as well as the management and utilization of natural resources and the environment.

(3) Reduce inequality and address the problem of poverty in line with the philosophy of sufficient economy and sustainable development.

（4）Foster collaboration with the government sector, local administrative organizations, the private sector, and civil society, all of which form the foundation of Thai society and culture, fostering unity.

The draft of the Rules aims to serve as a model for building the "public sphere" at the district and provincial levels. It seeks to promote mechanisms that initiate effective cooperation and integration processes, ultimately leading to the development of strong communities at the district, provincial, and national levels. This aligns with the reformation outlined in Section 4 of the national reformation plan, specifically addressing the system for building strong communities in the social section. The regulation is structured into two sections: Section 1 - General Articles and Section 2 - Promoting Strong Communities at the Area and Provincial Levels. It is designed to function as a guideline and tool, providing support to communities in constructing the "public sphere" at the district and provincial levels.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the comprehensive analysis provided, it can be concluded that the term "public sphere" delineates the communal space where individuals engage in political participation and local governance. This underscores the 'Public Sphere's significance as the hub of deliberative democracy, aimed at rectifying issues within representative democracy, especially during Thailand's decentralization process. While the emphasis lies on decentralizing power through local government bodies, representative democracy serves as a tool to gain power, often leading to its concentration among local elites, thereby limiting broader political engagement among citizens and posing challenges to decentralization.

Participation in the public sphere entails collaborative analysis, exchange, and discussion among the public or civic sector to shape local policies and monitor administrative management. This participation adheres to the principles of deliberative democracy, including inclusivity, addressing common problems, and reaching consensus in decision-making processes.

Key insights gleaned from these principles include:

1. Establishing a public sphere in each province presents diverse challenges contingent on local contexts such as size, social costs, political factors, and engagement of partner organizations. Strengthening partner organizations within provinces is vital for cultivating a sustainable Public Sphere.

2. The strength of the civil society sector within each province significantly influences its role in shaping provincial development directions. Despite social costs, fostering unity and implementing joint administration mechanisms are crucial for bolstering the sector's power and sustainability.

3. Operational principles within each public sphere are rooted in deliberative democracy. Consultation meetings prioritize consensus-building to set area-specific goals, facilitating diverse discussions and exchanges.

4. Setting goals for the public sphere's establishment varies across regions but aims to create a sustainable mechanism actively shaping provincial development. Common factors include a defined secretariat, securing operational budgets for meetings, and maintaining a flexible organizational structure.
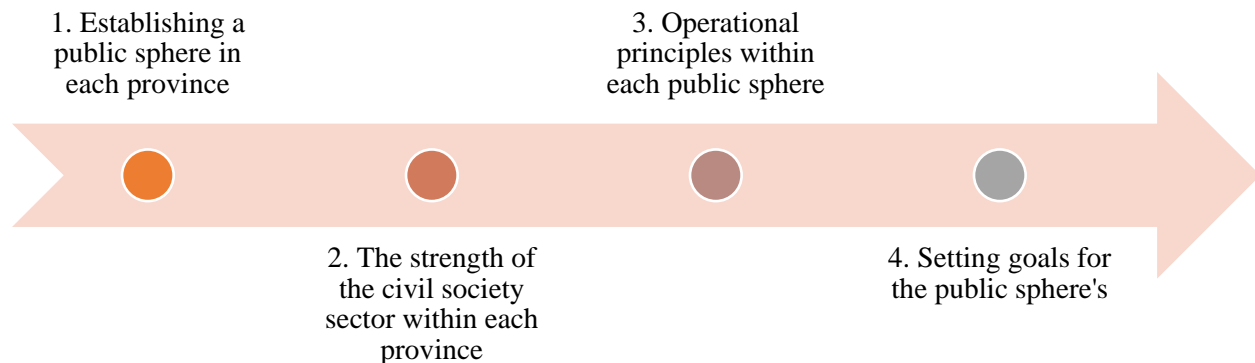
Figure 1 Key insights of public sphere

In mitigating inequality within the Thai social structure, particularly in the government sector, strong communities and the public sphere at the provincial level play pivotal roles. Employing deliberative democracy enhances community participation, allowing them to influence development directions. Advancing the Rules of the Office of the Prime Minister for Promoting Strong Communities is crucial, providing a guiding framework for constructing the public sphere in future provincial endeavors.

Acknowledgment

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