



# Thailand

JUREE VICHIT-VADAKAN

## **THE ROLE/INFLUENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

Civil society, if defined broadly as not-for-profit organizations or associations that are intermediate between families and the state, would include many types and forms of institutions that exist in Thai society today. It would include formally organized institutions that may or may not have legal status. It would include informally organized groups that have well formulated rules and regulations but are not registered as legal entities. Civil society organizations' (CSO) sizes and missions vary. Their organizational structure and leadership style also vary significantly. In other words, the sector includes older, well-established, elite-based organizations like the Thai Red Cross; centuries-old Chinese philanthropic organizations like the Pao-te-Shan-t'ang; and development cum philanthropic foundations under royal patronage and stewardship. It also includes professional associations, many of which perform a critical function for the poor and the marginalized, like the Lawyers Council of Thailand or the Medical Council of Thailand. The latter monitors professional medical standards and ethical conduct of its members. A large portion of Thai CSOs comprises charitable organizations that promote social welfare and the well being of society, especially the poor. Some philanthropic CSOs focus on service delivery, in particular helping to deliver services for the marginalized in society where public service delivery either is non-existent or unable to reach the target groups. There are also many women's auxiliary groups, usually organized around their husbands' professions. Most notable are each of the armed forces' wives' associations, and the associations of wives of bureaucratic departments and agencies. Such associations were established as voluntary organizations to enable women to engage in public charity but also help to supplement their husbands' careers.

In addition, many charitable, philanthropic organizations that make up the civil society landscape in Thailand are organized around health and disability concerns. Such CSOs are expected to raise funds to assist beneficiaries with different types of health or disability problems and to help promote good overall care and service delivery for their target groups. Examples of this category would be foundations serving the blind, the deaf or the mentally disabled.



**Caretakers of the Poor and the Marginalized:** Even though family and kinship networks continue to assist people in Thai society, there are an increasing number of people who fall outside these networks. To help meet the needs of these people, NGOs have established charity-based organizations like orphanages, homes for the elderly or the disabled; similar to the state-run institutions, which are not adequate to accommodate everyone who needs assistance.

**The Public Conscience:** In recent years, NGOs have helped to create an alternative version of the development model for Thai society. The 8<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan as well as the current 9<sup>th</sup> Plan included contributions from civil society, particularly from prominent civil society leaders who worked with the planning agency—The National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB)—in designing a bottom-up process of consultations that then formed the substance of the two plans. The processes of mobilizing support for the drafting of the new constitution and for the passing of the current constitution also showed us how the NGO community has been actively and successfully helping to bring social change to Thai society.

**Advocates for Social Justice and Human Rights:** In protecting their beneficiaries and promoting the plight of their target groups, NGOs often find themselves speaking out on and calling attention to social problems and advocating for policy changes to better improve conditions of the poor, the exploited, women and children, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and other disadvantaged groups in society.

**“Watchdogs” of the State and Private Business:** Civil society members or organizations may also call attention to abuses by some state officials, state agencies or to the collusion between state officials and private businesses.

**Promoters of the Democratic Process:** As promoters of democratization and the democratic process, some Thai NGOs have been involved in educating their constituents in understanding and practicing democracy through everyday activities and interactions.

**NGOs and the Thai public**

The relationship between NGOs and the public in Thailand has been unevenly good in some areas, lukewarm in others, and uneasy in others. The public tends to be favorably disposed to CSOs that focus on philanthropic activities. Non-profit organizations that assist the poor and the disabled are accepted, if not embraced. “Doing good deeds” is congruent with the traditional concept of “merit-making.” Hence, volunteering for philanthropy is considered good and proper, especially for



The public is often sympathetic whenever the media portrays a touching, real-life situation like the plight of Thai elephants and their mahouts as they roam the busy streets in the city in search of sustenance, or when women forced into prostitution died in a fire because they were tied up and could not escape. Miseries suffered by children due to hunger, physical or emotional abuses by adults or forced child labor always move the public to lend its support and sympathy to CSOs that help to alleviate children's suffering.

In other words, the public's reactions towards CSOs are situational and not always consistent. While the public is often moved by special services provided by CSOs for the sake of humanity, it is more ambivalent about CSOs that advocate for non-mainstream types of activities, like opposing mega-projects that may have harmful effects on the environment or on the local citizens. Over the past decade, advocacy or rights-based NGOs have supported the rural poor in protests for justice in resource utilization. The Pak Moon Dam and the Forum of the Poor's lengthy demonstrations are cases in point. The Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline project and the energy power plants became contested projects between the local citizens and the state or its representative organizations. The public is often torn and indecisive over conflicts in mega-projects. A large portion of the public believes that NGOs make things worse by inciting the local people against state authorities. In fact, rumors accusing NGOs of receiving foreign funds to agitate the local citizens do not fall on deaf ears. In other words, these accusations and propaganda often strike an innate fear and a sense of paranoia among the Thai public, most of whom have been instilled with a fear of external or foreign elements that will undermine Thai society and culture. The "subversive communists" of the past appear to be reborn today in the form of "exploitative foreigners." Hence, NGOs that receive foreign funds are often branded without any real examination or understanding of the specifics involved.

### ***Issues that Provoke Public Scrutiny***

In recent years, some negative public reactions towards the nonprofit sector have evolved around religion-based organizations. Religious leaders accused of breaking mandatory celibacy in Theravada Buddhist practices are frowned upon. Although giving to monks and temples is an act of merit-making that does not require the giver to monitor the use of funds, the public is unhappy over the personal misconduct of some monks, and this leads to the questioning of how merit donations may be misused. Relatedly, issues about management and organizational effectiveness of nonprofit organizations have begun to surface in public discourse.

In other instances, there have been public concerns over religious institutions that appear to lack transparency and accountability. In one important case, a large



While many in the sector believe that informal mechanisms exist to censure and sanction wayward CSOs, others believe that stronger and perhaps more institutionalized measures are needed. Some of the informal measures mentioned are: 1) informal social sanction, 2) informal social ostracism 3) exclusion from all joint activities, 4) an informal black list shared among themselves and also shared among NGO donor agencies, and 5) “truthful revelation” to those who ask after the wayward members.

While the notion that having stronger and better enforced laws and regulations by the state to help prevent misdeeds and abuses by the sector has been raised, most CSO members still believe that strict and strong legal measures will do more harm than good to the sector. In general, CSOs prefer self-regulation and monitoring. They believe that self-monitoring would be quite effective.

**RESPONSES BY GOVERNMENT**

The Thai government and its agencies have generally been lax and easy on all nonprofits or CSOs. However, the registration process and the legal and regulatory process and framework are not very enabling, as there are multiple agencies involved in the registration process instead of a one-stop service. Therefore, it usually takes too much time to go through the registration process, and too much time and energy are required to prove one’s worthiness for tax-exempt status. But the state does not generally pursue or persecute unregistered CSOs. In fact, more CSOs choose not to have legal status and therefore they don’t register themselves legally. The major difference between being registered and not is that unregistered CSOs are not entitled to state monetary support. Since state subsidies to this sector have not been a major source of income for the civil society sector, to some CSOs becoming a legal entity may seem less beneficial than not being one. A legally established CSO is bound by law to report its activities annually to the National Culture Commission and to report its income and expenditures to the revenue department. Tax payment is also required by law on earned income. Again, there is often a big gap between what is and what ought to be. Because state agencies are pressed with endless tasks and duties, generally, they do not give much attention to matters relating to nonprofit organizations. Hence, unless a particular CSO is under scrutiny, relevant and related government agencies tend not to examine, monitor or sanction CSOs. But it is believed that when a CSO or NGO is perceived to be a trouble maker, by making embarrassing a state agency or the government, then review and sanction via available state controlled mechanisms may be put in place. Hence NGOs complain about the singling out of some NGOs for unjust and arbitrary review and sanction. There are also accusations that the state applies double standards and discriminatory practices via its legal and regulatory mechanisms.



Those who advocate against government policies, programs and projects (even when they were designed and carried out initially by past governments) were seen as saboteurs and “foreign funded” people. This attitude of the government may run counter to the ideal of liberal democracy where dissent and freedom of speech, of assembly and belief are the basis of a pluralistic, democratic society. Intellectuals and NGOs are concerned that the government’s “harsh words” about advocacy NGOs may lead to an undesirable schism between the state and civil society. Although NGOs have been critics of some state policies and actions in the past, real antagonistic splits between the state and NGOs were few and far between. It will be most regrettable if this relationship deteriorates. Further, it will also have a negative impact on the well being and development of the nonprofit sector as a whole.

For Thailand, the issue of resolving the state and the nonprofit sector’s differences appears to be central. As the state still plays and will continue to play a strong role in social and economic development, civil society will stand to lose if development NGOs are excluded from activism or are discredited. Because many criticisms of NGOs tend to focus on their legitimacy rather than on organizational effectiveness, the issue of NGOs’ status and credibility will need to be addressed. This does not mean however that we should overlook the issue of good governance. Precisely, because the issue of legitimacy is an image and psychological problem compounded by cultural and historical factors, many NGOs leaders believe that financial disclosures and good management alone will not erase the negative image propagated by some authority figures. If one were ready to accept the principles of liberal democracy, it is argued that we will embrace the role of civil society in serving as checks and balances against possible abuses of power by the state. The role of CSOs in upholding the “public good” should be understood and appreciated by all parties concerned. This is a strong argument for the existence and promotion of CSOs in society.

**PARTNERSHIP AND INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS**

Since the current administrative reforms began, there has been a lot of rhetoric about the need for the state to retrench, to become more efficient and smaller. Public agencies are familiar with the pressure to downsize their staff. There are continuous discussions about the need for the state to outsource its non-essential tasks to the private and nonprofit sectors.

However, in actual practice, cooperation and collaborative partnership between the state and civil society remain uncharted territory. A lot more work needs to be done in this area, and examples of cooperation and partnerships that work will need to be highlighted as best practices for wider emulation.



Other measures to help strengthen the sector are the creation of networks, resource organizations, and umbrella organizations, to help improve the quality, standards and professionalism of the sector. A number of such institutions have come into existence over the past decades. Some examples are:

**National Council on Social Welfare of Thailand Under the Royal Patronage of HM the King:** This is an umbrella organization established to coordinate and support smaller CSOs. It receives both public and private funds. It works more with CSOs that provide charity and service delivery than with advocacy or rights based/development NGOs.

**The Local Development Institute (LDI)** was founded by enlightened parties with an aim to coordinate development activities of the NGO sector, with the hope of guiding and formulating government policies toward a more balanced and sustainable development path. In this context, the aim and primary function of NGO coordinating networks and bodies was to educate the public and government through documents, studies, researches and seminars. Where conditions required, NGO networks were to help voice dissent and opposition to state projects and policies that were deemed harmful and detrimental to society and the environment. LDI was an early example of this type of organization.

**The NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (NGO-COD)** is a network which helps to coordinate development or rights-based NGOs from around the country. It serves as a venue for dialogues, discussion and exchanges among members of the sector, especially with regard to issues of sustainability, both financial and otherwise. It is also concerned about the future role and mission of the sector, and about formulating strategies for social advocacy.

**The Development Support Consortium (DSC) and Thai Fund Foundation (TFF)** are relatively young and have recently merged as a supporting institution to help strengthen the sector in various ways. Paiboon Wattanasiritham has been the driving force behind DSC/TFF. Issues of good governance and organizational effectiveness had been discussed and promoted by DSC/TFF as reflected in the many training courses that DSC had offered over the years. Courses such as fundraising, financial accountability, proposal writing, human resource development and other courses to enhance organizational effectiveness have been conducted to strengthen management and capacity building for the sector. DSC/TFF has also provided small grants to small NGOs on behalf of funding agencies. Moreover, DSC/TFF' s role in enhancing small NGOs includes partnering with them in grant proposal writing and in efficient implementation of funded projects.



organization. However, some CSOs begin to recognize the need for more involvement of the board members and advisors as the organization becomes complex and diversified. Especially when they begin to fundraise locally, some CSOs feel the need to solicit active participation and support of their board members and advisors.

The winds of change are in the air, even though some CSOs are more alert and sensitive to them than others. For one thing, the political realities of today are different from the past few decades. Thailand has a democratically elected government that holds a majority of seats in the house and does not feel threatened by the instability felt by most multi-party coalition governments in the past. The stability and continuity of the current government ensures the implementing of its policies. Some of these policies are especially directed to the grassroots level. They aim to address the poor and rural-based poor people. As the government directs money and programs downward, directly into the villages through village fund committees, the development NGOs that used to serve as intermediaries between the state and the rural citizenry find themselves less relevant. Their role and function as vanguards of the poor seem to be bypassed. The government also recognizes this fact as it pronounced recently that “when the government can provide direct services and assistance to the people, there will be no need for NGOs in Thai society.” It should be clarified here that the reference above was probably directed towards rights-based advocacy NGOs and not directed towards charity or service delivery CSOs.

Under a strong government that commands a lot of control and power in society, there is always a danger that should the government choose not to listen to criticism and dissent, there will be no recourse except during elections. Thailand’s rights-based, development NGOs that have served as a system of checks and balances against power holders may be undermined and swept aside by populist policies. Perhaps under such circumstances, the most vulnerable group in the nonprofit sector will need to be particularly adaptive in order to survive and continue to be relevant and effective.

Civil society in general has felt the need to be more self-reliant and resourceful in seeking funds to operate and survive. Funding needs relate directly to the need for good and effective management as well as the need for transparency and accountability. Many NGOs have tried social enterprises in order to raise funds for themselves. Others have tried to adapt and partner with government agencies either as subcontractors or work in partnership with state agencies.

Efficiency and effectiveness in the nonprofit sector as a whole need to be fostered and nurtured. Generally, the sector needs to be more hard-nosed about efficiency and organizational effectiveness in managing their everyday affairs. There also needs to be more attention given to gaining public trust and public goodwill.

Many examples of innovative activities—like CSOs setting up recycling businesses for waste products, organic vegetables for good health, community retail business, and gas stations for members—have not succeeded, whereas their counterparts in the for-profit sector have survived and even thrived. An analytical comparison of the experiences in the two sectors often shows that CSOs' weakness lies in their lack of management skills. Moreover, the principles of transparency and accountability need to be instilled every step of the way. For instance, good accounting, reporting, and inventory systems are fundamental to every organization, big or small, for profit or not for-profit. Thai CSOs will need to pay special attention to incorporating such systems into their everyday practice.

Two major challenges for CSOs and especially for development/rights-based NGOs are:

**To have adequate funding for their survival and operation:** Because of the sensitive and delicate situation in Thailand today over “foreign phobia,” NGOs and CSOs in general will have to systematically fundraise within the country. In order to do this effectively, management skills as well as transparency and accountability will certainly help.

**Image and public confidence/trust:** Image is so crucial to the public that CSOs and development NGOs in particular will need to consider this issue seriously.

The notion of legitimacy as understood and expressed in the Thai context is not merely a legal issue. In fact, it evolves around the acceptance of the public due to the unblemished image of an organization, its prestige and status via association with prestigious persons, its publicized activities, and its performance as perceived by society.

Again, transparency and accountability regarding the finances of a CSO will help to dispel the image of CSOs as foreign agents. Financial disclosure as well as publicizing programs and activities will demonstrate a CSO's transparency and accountability.

**Alliances:** Lastly, perhaps the time has come for CSOs, especially development/advocacy NGOs to build alliances with the media, with progressive elements in business, state bureaucracies, academics, and even politicians. No longer can NGOs afford to live isolated from other sectors and respond only to their donors. NGOs need to communicate their accomplishments to society regularly.

To successfully implement the above, NGOs' vocabularies, argumentative style, discourse and presentation of themselves may need to be modified. While preserving their core message about social justice and sustainable and balanced development, NGOs need to translate their message into an easily understandable format for a basically conservative public. In other words, NGOs may want to appear neat, clean, well-dressed and respectable in a conventional sense.



## List of participants

### **Group discussions and interviews of NGOs leaders**

#### ***Group discussions***

**Khunying Aumporn Meesuk**  
National Commission on  
Human Rights

**Ms. Srisawang Puowongpat**  
Foundation for Women

**Mr. Paiboon Wattanasiritham**  
Community Organizations  
Development Institute (CODI)

**Dr. Somkiat Tangkitvanichkul**  
Thailand Development  
Research Institute

**Mr. Phipop Thongchai**  
Campaign for Popular Democracy

**Ms. Pissmai Kanobdee**  
Business Group for Thai Society

**Mrs. Narumon Lim**  
Development Cooperation  
Foundation

**Ms. Mattana Thanomphan**  
Magic Eyes Foundation

**Mr. Promboon Panichapak**  
Raks Thai Foundation  
(Care-Thailand)

**Mr. Kanchit Sukjaimitr**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mr. Somchai Homlaor**  
Forum Asia

**Ms. Raywadee Prasertchareonsuk**  
NGO Coordinating Committee on  
Development (NGO-COD)

**Ms. Benjamas Siripat**

Local Development Institute

**Mr Dech Poomkacha**  
NGO Coordinating Committee on  
Development (NGO-COD)

**Mrs. Kannika Kuankachon**  
Thai Volunteer Service

**Mrs. Rosana Tositrakul**  
Thai Holistic Health Foundation

**Mr. Supree Buosinghsoey**  
Foundation for Rural Lives  
Development

**Ms. Somlak Hutanuwatr**  
Social Ventures

**Mr. Preeda Tiasuwan**  
Social Ventures

**Prof. Thongsri Kambhu**  
Foundation for the Blind

**Mr. Suthep Chidchom**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mr. Walchai Sreharan**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mr. Cherd Khonghoy**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mr. Annop Nipitmetawee**  
Development Support Consortium

**Ms. Saichol Kampun**  
Development Support Consortium

**Ms. Suwannee Dabbang**  
Development Support Consortium

**Dr. Juree Vichit-Vadakan**  
Center for Philanthropy and Civil  
Society

**Dr. Chirawan Bhakdibutr**  
Center for Philanthropy and  
Civil Society

**Dr. Kanokkan Anukansai**  
Center for Philanthropy and Civil  
Society

**Ms. Arpapat Boonrod**  
Center for Philanthropy and Civil  
Society

**Ms. Nongnoot Puangpong**  
Center for Philanthropy and Civil  
Society

### ***In-depth interviews***

**Mr. Dech Poomkacha**  
NGO Coordinating Committee on  
Development (NGO-COD)

**Mr. Supree Buosinghsoey**  
Foundation for Rural Lives  
Development

**Ms. Pissmai Kanobdee**  
Business Group for Thai Society

**Ms. Srisawang Puowongpat**  
Foundation for Women

**Mr. Phipop Thongchai**  
Campaign for Popular Democracy

**Mr. Chinchai Cheechareon**  
Ministry of Social Development and  
Human Security

**Mr. Jaturong Boonyarattasunthorn**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mr. Gawin Chutima**  
Development Support Consortium

**Mrs. Siriporn Sakrobanek**  
Foundation for Women

**Mrs. Rosana Tositrakul**  
Thai Holistic Health Foundation

**Ms. Sudarat Seriwat**  
Fight Against Child Exploitation  
(FACE)

**Mr. Jadet Choavilai**  
Friends of Women Foundation



## Bibliography

- Boonyarahanasoontorn, Jaturong and Chutima, Gawin. 1995. **Thai NGOs: The Continuing Struggle for Democracy. The Perspective, Role and Experiences of Thai NGOs in Social, Economic and Political Development.** Bangkok: Edison Press Products, Co.,Ltd.
- Phuawongphat, Srisawang. 1995. *NGOs and People's Movement : As Reflected by Themselves and Others.* Kiatiprajuk, Suntaree. eds. **Thai Development Newsletter**, No 29.
- Pongsapich, Amara. 1994. *Philanthropy in Thailand. Evoluting Pattern of Asia – Pacific Philanthropy.* Republic of Korea: The Institute of East and West Studies.
- Prasartset, Suthy. 1995. *The Rise of NGOs as a Critical Social Movement in Thailand.* **Biannual Bulletin of the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives**, Vol. 11, No. 2.
- Puangsamli, Anuchat. 1997. **Civil Society-Language, Idea and Significance, Institute of Local Community Development.** Paper for the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies. 9-12 Jan 2002. Bangkok: Ramkhamhaeng University Press.
- Pumkacha, Dech. 1999. *Role and Future of NGOs in Thailand.* **NGO 2000.** Petprasert, Narong, eds. Bangkok: Edison Press Products, Co.,Ltd.
- Siripat, Benchamart and Mulada, Surapol. 2002. **NGOs: the Grassroot Development Activitists, the Essential Type for Thai Society (in Thai).** Bangkok: Athit product group.
- Thabchumpon, Naruemon. 2002. **New face of Thai Civil Society : Economic Crisis and Its Political Consequences.** Paper for the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies, 9-12 Jan 2002. Bangkok: Ramkhamhaeng University press.
- Thai Development Support Committee. **2003 Directory of Non-Government Organizations.** Bangkok: Thai Development Support Committee.
- Thepsittha, Somporn. 2001. **What are NGOs and their roles?.** Document for Seminar on Voluntary Support of the Handicapped, Office of the National Commission on Social Welfare, Development of Public Welfare, Ministry of Labor & Social Welfare.

---

Tongdeelerd, Chatchawan. 2001. **Origin and Development of NGOs in Northern Thailand (in Thai)**. Chiang Mai : Kuang Vieng Publishing Co.Ltd.

Vichit-Vadakan, Juree. 2001. *Central Role in Development for Thai NGO*. **Alliance**, Vol 6, No, 4, December 2001. quoted in finds.articles.com.

Vichit-Vadakan, Juree. 2001. **NGOs in the Asia and Pacific Region: Roles, status and activities**. Paper presented in the Seminar on "Civil Society in Asia", July 10-12, 2001. Bangkok: Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, National Institute of Development Administration.

Vichit-Vadakan, Juree. 2002. **An Overview of Philanthropy and Civil Society in Thailand**. Bangkok: Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society, National Institute of Development Administration.

Vichit-Vadakan, Juree. 2002. *Civil Society, Development and Governance: Reflection on the Thai Situation*. **Civil Society and Governance**. James Manor ed. Sussex University.

Vichit-Vadakan, Juree. 2003. Thai Civil Society: Exploring a Diverse and Complex Landscape. **Civil Society in Asia**. David C. Schak and Wayne Hudson ed. Griffith University.