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1. Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the perception and practical implications of the policymakers in every part of the globe. The governments have tried and tested several measures and depict successful and unsuccessful learning experiences. This chapter provides an insight into in-depth understanding of COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate repercussions in Thailand. The need for improved and effective risk governance and adequate disaster mitigation measures is imminent in Thailand.

Since February 2020, the worldwide spread of COVID-19 has adversely affected the economies and social setup of several societies. Thailand being dependent upon the tourism sector suffered a major backlash in terms of reducing number of tourists, resulting in reduction of financial omnipotence of Thai economy. A comprehensive approach toward the accurate risk governance and enhancing sustainability in Thailand is dependent upon the amalgamation of all the stakeholders, who are involved in the process of risk reduction and providing the resilience in the Thai economy. This approach is to be incorporated at the policymakers, decision-making individuals in public and private business enterprises, financial institutions, and other prominent stakeholders.

Thailand is the central hub of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region and acts as a catalyst in financial growth and development of region. The neighboring
countries inclusive of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam are dependent on Thailand in terms of enhancing monitory opportunities. However, with disasters striking and invariably affecting the resilience is a hurdle in adequate risk governance and sustainability in Thailand and adversarial ripple effects beyond Thailand.

2. Literature review

Risk governance deals with all aspects of adequate formulations of decisions and policies in order to achieve accurate response toward risk and achieve sustainability and resilience. This is found to be the core concept for generation of risk governance in most of the countries. This is true as well in case of Thailand. Thailand boasts of existing risk reduction framework at levels of risk governance. The response toward risks is well drafted; however, the implementation of these well-drafted policies at the ground level reality is still questionable. The risk governance involves all the stakeholders and thus, it becomes essential to provide for well-defined responsibilities in times of uncertainties and with complex nature of risks (Van Asselt & Renn, 2011).

This risk governance is indulged through the combined efforts of government, communities, and other organizations working toward disaster risk reduction and adequate governance. The uncertainties in terms of risk and inadequate response are directly related with the unpreparedness and incapacities to deal with shocking and abrupt risk scenarios (Van Asselt & Vos, 2008). The existence of framework in Thailand is also unable to cope accurately and suffers from achieving resilience. This is in line with the incapacities of local and provincial levels of governance.

Thailand is not a sole affected state in terms of COVID-19 in 2020. The multifaceted pandemic resulted in ripple impacts in ASEAN and then beyond with adverse impacts upon trade, logistics, and supply chain management related with Thailand. It was the risk response mechanism which isolated Thailand from the world. Without the tourists and closure of the international borders, Thailand suffered enormously in terms of losing the foreign income and still is unable to attract tourists.

The federal political and administrative framework in Thailand is also found to be inaccurate in terms of disaster risk reduction. Prior to 1970, bureaucrats were responsible to manage the risk scenarios with close collaboration with the military. Post 1970, the protests from the people led to political wing parties and their power play in Thailand. Since then industrial revolution, focus on the SMEs and tourism-based economy has been an important feature of Thai economy, providing resources to deal with the risk scenarios (Shatkin, 2004). After the 1997 constitution and further in 1999 the Decentralization Act inculcated the Thai risk reduction framework for higher widespread and faster risk response and sustainable economy (Dufhues et al., 2015).

The structure of Government framework comprises of 75 provinces which are managed by the elected head of provincial administrative organization (PAO) and another centralized framework headed by the governor appointed by the Ministry of Interior, Thailand. These provincial authorities are further divided into autonomous local administrations (LAOs) with elected head and municipalities and rural subdistrict administrative organizations.
(SAOs) appointed by the provincial authority (Department of Local Administration, 2010; Nagai & Kagoya, 2008).

2.1 Risk governance and natural disasters in Thailand

Thailand has been an interesting and active example of changing political systems and its effects upon the governance. Despite of enjoying one of most famous tourist destination in the world, progressive industrial and agricultural sectors, and technological advancements in the country, Thailand suffers the instability at the political levels which in turn diminishes the capacities of the existing disaster management and governance frameworks at levels. The previous research agrees with these scenarios as without the innovative measures and implications of governance, achieving resilience would be unrealistic (Fung, 2006).

2.2 COVID-19 in Thailand

Thailand has been struggling and combating COVID-19 better in comparative levels among the other neighboring countries. However, there is lack of accurate understanding and consequent planning and implementation of risk governance at local, national, and international level (Tantrakarnapa et al., 2020).

2.3 Pandemic risk reduction

Thailand suffers from the adequate pandemic risk reduction as is evident with wider impacts of COVID-19 upon human lives, loss in business enterprises, and enormous reduction in the per capita income during 2020. One of the major reasons found in previous literature is the inability of Thailand’s risk governance to optimally utilize the investments in the economy by the government policies (Koen et al., 2018). Another reasons include the lack of cooperation among the government agencies and disaster risk reduction departments (Pathak & Ahmad, 2018); gender imbalances among the Thai economy (Pathak & Emah, 2017); centralized and strict top to bottom approach (Marks & Lebel, 2016).

3. Methodology

The chapter follows qualitative methodology with focus upon the interviews of the respondents. The collected data were analyzed through Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis (Sarsby, 2016).

The study area selected for this research is Bangkok metropolitan area as the impacts were felt directly in the capital city in Thailand.

The sampling was random purposive sampling among the disaster management stakeholders and data collected from the Ministry of Health, Department of Disaster Preparedness and Management (DDPM), Public Works Department, Immigration department, Police and Fire Service stations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), CEO and Managers from SMEs, International Organizations including Oxfam International and UN, universities
directly involved in disaster risk reduction, and governance related project leaders. Table 3.1 provides details of the respondents for the in-depth interviews.

### 4. Results and findings

The results from this research provides several implications and their direct and indirect repercussion upon the governance mechanism, risk reduction, and attaining sustainability in Thailand during the difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4.1 Inaccurate risk perception

Thailand suffers from inaccurate disaster and risk event perception. The absence of the actual risk perception among all levels of governance is prevalent. The government, public works departments, authorities, and even the communities are not serious for being prepared for risk and uncertainties. The anxiety levels were found to be very high with significant impact upon the economic and social impacts in Thailand (Goodwin et al., 2020). The incidents where the face masks were not properly worn due to misperception of COVID-19 not being a serious risk resulted in higher number of infections in Bangkok alone. The social distancing was not adequately followed among close friends and family members. Several cases of Thai nationals living abroad and then returning to Bangkok brought with them COVID-19. One of the female respondent added,

The travelers returning to their home towns in Thailand are not serious about the covid-19 risk. The not only jeopardize their immediate family, neighbors but us also, who are working extensively for them.

### TABLE 3.1 Profile of the respondents.

| Serial number | Sector                  | Gender | Age group | Educational qualification | Designation      |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------|-----------|--------------------------|------------------|
| 1             | Government Organizations| 4      | 35–50     | Masters                  | Policymakers     |
| 2             | Nongovernmental         | 4      | 30–45     | Bachelors                | Managers         |
| 3             | Organizations (NGOs)   | 7      | 25–60     | Masters                  | Entrepreneurs    |
| 4             | Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) | 5 | 30–50 | Masters | Managers |
| 5             | International          | 8      | 30–60     | PhD                      | Academic experts |
|               | Educational Institutions| 8      |           |                          |                  |
|               | Total                   | 28     | 22        |                          |                  |
Thailand is equipped with several leading research-oriented universities. However, there were several universities which did not close the university down for faculty and staff members. This led to unnecessary exposure toward COVID-19 risk toward the university employees. One of the female professor from leading Thai university added,

I understand the pressure on university due to online work culture, reduced number of students, and risk of less student admissions in coming months and to provide best online education dissemination to all the current students. However, we, faculty and staff members also need to be at home and be responsible. Anyways, we were forced to come to office and meetings were done in closed rooms.

On the other hand, the industries and SME managers had to deal with the similar complaints from the employees. This was found in abundance in the logistics and supply chain related SMEs. The demand for daily routine products remained constant in the market, whereas the supply was reduced. The government also could not manage the adequate supply of basic necessity items including the face masks. One of the food product manufacturing company executive added,

The consumers required all the daily routine items. I was unable to buy facemask for my employees and it was really difficult to request them to arrange for their own face masks. This led to low quality face masks in my company, but I did not have any choice, as had to provide supply of my products.

Such experiences show lack of the initiatives of the government to provide the basic precautionary measures such as face masks during such a catastrophic pandemic. This was observed among the ongoing companies. The companies which shut down during and after COVID-19 were among the most affected and find it difficult to bounce back from this pandemic.

4.2 Inadequate risk governance

The inadequate framework of risk governance and disaster response poses hurdles in achieving the resilience in the Thai economy. COVID-19 ripped off Thailand with its supremacy in the region and inflow of foreign currency resulting in lower financial reporting in 2020. This was in line with the inadequate risk governance policies adopted by the Thailand’s ministries, departments, and agencies. One of the tourism development officer added,

There is serious absence of risk governance at all levels, especially at community level. What people will eat when there is no way of earning money? Forget about education and other amenities during Covid-19 pandemic. But I can see over dependence on tourism and ineffective governance.

The dependence upon tourism and neighboring country to formulate the risk reduction policies has been a failure to implement the adequate decentralized risk governance. The adverse repercussions were felt at local levels and overall impact was felt during the year 2020 at the national level. One of disaster management lecturers at leading university in Bangkok added,

It is unfortunate the way government and agencies are governing the Covid-19 situations. Every day changing policies only confuse the ground level labor force and communities. Thailand needs to involve every section of the economy for overall resilience in the economy.
This posed a major constraint for the implementations of unconceivable pandemic risk reduction and prompt responses in Thailand.

4.3 Political and monarchy implications

The instability of political system in Thailand is visible since decades. Multiple military coups, political wings, and bombing in several tourist attractions in the past pose an imminent threat toward the risk governance in Thailand. However, during natural disasters, the disaster management framework is activated. The monarchy is a soft topic in Thailand as Thai law forbids from open criticism of the Thai Royal family. The unease developing throughout the country due to uncertainties, anxieties, and lack of government assistance led to severe protests by the youth of the country. The repercussions were felt beyond the boundaries to Germany, where the Thai King is currently residing. This led to complexities in the local and national risk governance as the public protests led to nonobedience of the social distancing between protestors and the security forces. Germany also is divided on the stance of allowing the Thai King to reside in German soil and run Thailand through diplomatic immunity. One of the political science professor in a public university added,

> It is really unfortunate that the highest level of authority in Thailand is not in Thailand during such perilous pandemic times. The amount of policy implementations, government resources and financial expenditures spent unnecessarily on maintain law and order, could have been utilized otherwise to reducing pandemic risk.

The Prime Minister of Thailand also had to face backlash due to incapacities of the government to generate adequate risk reduction measures. It was found in several instances where the ministers were not wearing face masks themselves and were interviewing and suggesting strict face mask wearing regulations. This led to high unrest among the Thai and expat communities in Thailand. One of the public works department officer adds,

> The government at national level is busy with handling and managing the protests. They simply do not accurately manage the visible Covid-19 risk. Everyone is simply blaming each other. Will it solve anything or reduce Covid-19 pandemic risk?

4.4 Social unrest

Thailand has been struggling with recurring protest from the public since decades. This was observed in the past during monarchy and then transformation into not so stable democracy. This was found to be a ground reality with the current protests going on in the capital city of Bangkok. One of the NGO respondent added,

> How can we think of a mass protest in these Covid-19 [sic] times? The political instability and the youth of the country is dissatisfied. So many jobless youth and then pressures from the financial insecurity and high risk of medical and financial components reduces are efforts to support the people of Thailand.

The community behavior and responses are the epitome of efficiency of any policy implementation by the governance at any level (Shaw et al., 2020). Thailand suffers from the unease among several communities during COVID-19 and other major disaster such as floods. One of the local resident who took active participation in the social movement added,
Where is the democracy? What about local communities and general public? Employment are reducing, less sales affecting the SMEs and what is government agencies acting upon? Where is our leader and political support? Are we yet to be blamed to raise our voices? Mere force and restrictions will not solve anything.

Thus, it is essential to involve the society as a whole among the governance to achieve diminishing social unrest in Thailand.

4.5 Successful response toward COVID-19

Thailand has, to a certain extent, been able to overcome the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The closure of national borders, travel restrictions for tourists, and high end COVID-19 insurance prior to travel to Thailand have been some of the measures implemented by the risk governance framework in Thailand. The respondent from the Immigration office in Bangkok added,

We understand the inconvenience caused towards the tourists and travelers, expats and other foreign nationals living or wanting to travel to our country. We try to deal with the immediate threat of Covid-19. The response in this manner was essential to ensure no further spread of Covid-19 pandemic. We plan to open the economy for the world by 2021.

However, in the long run, since March 2020, these measures have backfired due to unnecessary extensions of the travel restrictions. This resulted in the decline of the tourists visiting Thailand and the imbalance between the adequacies of COVID-19 (Rittichainuwat et al., 2020).

Government announced several public holidays and schemes for the domestic tourist for enhancing traveling as the famous Songkran festival was postponed in the month of April 2020. This resulted in more movement of local tourists within the 75 provinces in Thailand. However, cases of COVID-19 started to appear in the far flung areas of rural Thailand. One of the tourism lecturer at a university added,

Yes, we do need to revive the tourism but not this way, and definitely not so soon. At least, currently several rural parts of Thailand are free from Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore I support the travel restrictions rather than travel incentives even for the local and domestic tourists.

The economic measures to boost the spending capacities of the communities were found to be implemented. For instance, the discount in the bills and invoice for a total sum of 150 Thai baht at most of tourism related SME and business for Thai nationals enhanced their will to spend more and at the same time insured enhanced sales for the business owners. However, this also had its own repercussions in terms to increased traveling and leniency in the social distancing at many businesses.

These were found to be an adequate measure to respond toward impacts of the COVID-19; however, the implementations and precautionary measures are to be strengthened at all local levels of governance.

4.6 Resilience

Disasters require special attention in order to achieve resilience and pave way for sustainable development and growth (Djalante, 2012). Resilience toward disasters has been an
integral part of the Thailand’s risk governance since the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The 2005 Disaster Management Act laid the foundation of a sustainable and resilient Thai economy and society. This led to setting up national level disaster risk governance set up at all levels of government. Departments were set up to implement the policies and procedures to be followed in times of disaster events. However, it was found that the mismanagement of several disaster mitigation and delay in preparedness activities led to the elongated impacts of COVID-19 in Thailand. One of the local level risk reduction and governance official added,

It is really difficult to achieve resilience and sustainability with the current governance structure. We need to involve all departments, communities and youth to fight with such pandemic. Resilience is not achieved in one day, it’s a continuous process.

Another respondent from the leading SME in Metropolitan area added,

We (SMEs) provide for local, national and international markets. The social unrest and agitations negatively affected us. We contribute to local and national GDP. Our interest, security and well-being must be maintained for a resilient social and economic set up.

Resilience is achieved with the continuous efforts from government, communities, as well as other stakeholders. The risk governance has to involve the stakeholders at every level of governance to attain long-term sustainability and resilience.

5. Discussions

SWOT for sustainability in the society as well as economy in Thailand against pandemic and natural disasters has been carried out. The SWOT analysis summarizes the findings and descriptive data in enhanced interpretation for the effectiveness of future policy formulations and implementations (Fig. 3.1).

The following points provide the SWOT analysis for this study.

**Strengths:** Thailand boasts of the existing risk governance framework implemented at all levels of governance. However, in disaster scenarios the framework is unable to manage the scenario effectively. Thailand has been divided into administrative divisions including national level, provincial level, district level, and village levels with Department of Disaster Preparedness and Management (DDPM) providing all the necessary equipment to encounter disaster. The medical infrastructure is robust and could cater to emergency needs. The police and fire station services are prompt. The search and rescue departments are equipped with helicopters and motorized boats (Pathak & Ahmad, 2016; Pathak & Drobnik, 2019). However, all these equipment and readiness is inefficiently utilized in absence of effective governance.

Likewise, the indigenous knowledge and practices within the Thai communities is commendable to be a disaster risk reduction measure and assists the governance agencies at all levels of governance. For instance, the greeting gesture of “Swadikrub” with folded hands from a distance proved to be the best measure to implementing the social distancing in Thailand. Similarly, the indigenous practices in terms of the disseminating essential information resulted in COVID-19 prevention in all regions of Thailand. The spread of
COVID-19 was found to be negligible in the rural areas of Thailand. The governance agencies require to include these practices and enhance the governance against the disaster events.

**Weaknesses:** Thailand has been struggling with a stable political system since decades. The presence of monarchy and parallel government system results in chaotic scenarios. Above this, the military coup has also been common in the past. All these hurdles result in inefficiencies of policies and adequate disaster management. This was found to be important factor as the social unrest was against the monarch and current government was caught between youth and monarchy obligations. This was a major cause of civil unrest and violent exchanges between youth and law regulating bodies amid COVID-19 pandemic. Similar implications were felt with immigration policies with majority of the COVID-19 positive patients coming from abroad, questioning the quarantine measures adopted by the governing agencies.

Community behavior toward the COVID-19 pandemic was also found to be divided in the absence of clear policies by the local governing agencies. The rural Thailand did not follow the face mask and social distancing, resulting in COVID-19 Pandemic cases in Island away from the mainland. In the urban setting, the reduced income levels raised revolutionary sentiments among the youth resulting in civil unrest and decline in the economic activities and services.

**Opportunities:** Amid the declining governance initiatives in Thailand, several opportunities are untapped by the local and national governing agencies. One of the major breakthroughs could be achieved in the already existing medical expertise through adequate policies implementation. For instance, Thailand caters to health tourism; this provides for an opportunity for the health, skin care, and other medical expertise and specialists.

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, Thailand was one of the most favorite tourist destinations in whole Asia (Hwandee & Phumchusri, 2020). However, during COVID-19 pandemic, strict
restriction was implemented for the tourists. Even with recent opening of border for tourists resulted in almost negligible tourists due to high costs of travel and medical insurance requirements and then 14-day quarantine expenses.

Disaster risk reduction adoptions at all policy formulations are essential to achieve effective governance in Thailand. The sustainability of Thailand indirectly affects the neighboring countries and provides for regional growth and development.

**Threats:** Despite all the opportunities available to Thailand, inadequate risk governance diminishes the actual sustainability and resilience. The structure of disaster risk reduction and management framework is in place; however, the ground realities are different due to inadequate policy implementations at local and national levels of governance. The inaccuracies in terms of disaster risk reduction measures and overemphasis on resource utilization in each individual department led to wastage of minimal available resources and in turn increased the time duration and adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another major factor is the inadequate risk perception for communities as well as the risk governance in Thailand. It starts from the national level and seeps into the disaster risk reduction framework until the local and communities levels. The fact that the risk of COVID-19 pandemic is not taken seriously in the rural Thailand and also at the border control led to second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in the month of December 2020.

Thailand being a fast-growing economy requires to provide sustainable and resilient environment in the country, especially during the disaster scenarios. The COVID-19 pandemic provided for an opportunity to test the existing policies and formulate resilient and sustainable policy in future with higher efficient implementations at all levels of governance.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The adequate and effective risk governance is the key to manage and recover faster from any disaster. However, there is a dire need to shift from rigid dominant system and provide for efficient governance at all levels of governance (Gao & Yu, 2020). Thailand has the capacities and will to cope up from and bounce back from disasters such as COVID-19 based upon the success of its adequate implementations of the policy at levels efficiently. The following recommendations are focused upon the risk governance at various levels of risk response enhancing the resilience with inclusive of all stakeholders.

6.1 Local level governance

- Autonomy should be provided to the provincial and district level of governance during disasters.
- Capacity must be enhanced before, during, and after the disaster event at community and local level of governance.
- To curtail the civil unrest, adequate and accurate security forces must be ready to be deployed whenever and wherever needed.

6.2 National level governance

- Effective and adequate policy formulation and implementation must be ensured at national level.
Tourism must be emphasized and incorporated among foreign and disaster management policy formulations at national level of risk governance. Coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders, department, agencies, and levels of governance must be included in risk governance. The national level must ensure provincial capacities to collaborate with local communities’ needs and requirements.

6.3 Global level governance

- Maintain adequate relations among countries with high trade possibilities.
- Efficient foreign relation policies.
- Learning and adoption of best governance experiences from the other countries.

7. Way ahead

The chapter paves way for further microlevel research in terms of strengthening of local risk governance and response mechanism. The policy formulation and its successful implementation are directly related to the risk governance. However, the local communities and societal setup has to be analyzed and included in the governance. Single country sustainability leads to the sustainable growth and development of the region as well. For instance, Thailand’s growth assists Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries for further development and opportunities (Ren & Bao, 2020). This needs to include among future research for enhanced risk governance among vulnerable communities and countries.

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I. Overview and national governance response