Strengthen the Effectiveness of Environmental Protection through Community Empowerment for Building Corruption-Free Society

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Abstract. Environmental protection in the community is an important part of sustainable development. However, the effectiveness of community environmental protection is often affected by corruption, which has compromised the effectiveness. Corruption is a major social problem widely affecting all humanity around the world today. Thailand has also been confronted with the mentioned issue for a long time. Thailand’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranking shows no improvement. As a result, Thailand gives priority to a campaign to become corruption-free society. Particularly, it focuses on the community level as historic grassroots society with the cultural landscape differences in order to strengthen the community’s ability to manage itself in a sustainable manner and to play a major role in the nation’s development. This research study aimed at developing and implementing a system and mechanism including enhancing community participation in the community’s corruption prevention and solution. It focused on creating the community’s practice culture by applying good governance principles in participation, transparency, rule of law and accountability. In this regard, the community committee applied a counterbalance system, particularly in transparency, accurate accounting records of the community’s income and expense including the rule for the disbursement. In addition, the community members were informed about a variety of community activities and encouraged to participate in the mentioned activities. Importantly, to ensure a positive outcome, the relevant government agencies allocating the budget to support the community must closely supervise, monitor and strictly abide by the rule for budget spending so that a system and mechanism can be applied for driving the community to become sustainable and efficient “Corruption Free Community”.

Keywords: Sustainable Environment, Empowerment, Community, Corruption-free society, Anti-corruption

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

¹ This article is part of a research study entitled "A System and Mechanism Application Process to Prevent Corruption by Community Participation: A Case Study of the Bangbua Community in the Bangkhen District and the Lang Flat Ruampattana Community in the Laksei District, Bangkok" funded by Thailand Science Research and Innovation in 2019.
Environmental protection in the community is a very important issue for sustainable development. Government financial subsidies are also the main driving force for environmental protection. However, the effectiveness of community environmental protection is often affected and reduced by corruption, which has compromised the effectiveness. How to reduce the negative effects of corruption and propose an environment that reduces corruption is the goal we must strive to achieve a sustainable society.

Corruption is a major social problem widely affecting all humanity around the world. Votava, a World Bank senior financial specialist, commented that “Corruption Main Cause of Poverty, when corruption is high in a nation, the country cannot use its resources and taxes to support its citizens”. In addition, the inequality and poverty situation has been the country’s major problem that every government has attempted to find various ways to solve. However, Thailand is still unable to move from a low-income country to a high-income country. Moreover, Transparency International provides corruption ranking and announces the Corruption Perceptions Index: CPI to the public yearly. The corruption ranking during 2016-2018 showed that Thailand’s anti-corruption development was ineffective. In 2016, Thailand got 35 marks (from 100) and was ranked 101st out of 176 countries. Later in 2017, it got 37 marks and was ranked 96th out of 180 countries, and in 2018, its mark was reduced to 36 and was ranked 99th out of 180 countries respectively. That means Thailand’s anti-corruption efforts have not succeeded literally because Thailand’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranking shows no improvement. As a result, Thailand gives priority to a campaign to become corruption-free society. Particularly, it focuses on the community level as historic grassroots society with the cultural landscape differences. The previous constitution of the kingdom of Thailand certified the right of a community and the people to play a major role in the local and nation’s development in order to strengthen the community’s ability to manage itself in a sustainable manner.

According to the first phase of this research study entitled “A System and Mechanism Application Process to Prevent Corruption by Community Participation : A Case Study of the Bangbua Community in the Bangkhen District and the Lang Flat Ruam pattana Community in the Laksi District, Bangkok” funded by Thailand Research Fund (TRF) in 2018, there were many factors relating to the forms and channels of corruption in the 4 community areas. Therefore, these communities need to have a system and mechanism to control the channels of corruption in the form of a committee or team work and apply a system of checks and balances. The community committee’s work focuses on transparency, the community’s income and expense account, an arrangement of forms and documents, a set of deposit – payment regulations for auditing purposes, and people’s awareness of and participation in the community’s activities. Moreover, the government sector giving a budget to the communities must monitor, follow up and abide by the regulations. The procurement done by the district office should be strict and a violator must be seriously punished.

However, to become a corruption-free community, a community needs to integrate good governance into the community way of life and establish a system and mechanism that prevents and solve corruption problems by community participation. The principles of good governance for building a corruption-free community include participation, transparency, rule of law, and accountability. The research team has tried to apply a system and mechanism to prevent and solve corruption problems by community participation in the Bangbua Community, Bangkhen District and the Lang Flat Raumpattana Community, Laksi District, Bangkok. The research team selected the Bangbua Community and the Lang Flat Ruam pattana Community as samples of areas in Bangkok. The strength of these communities stemmed from their ability to unite in order to deal with crises in their own areas. With regard to the Bangbua Community, the people and the community leader succeeded in fighting for the Baan Mankong.
Program. The research team was convinced that a community with dynamic people and a strong community leader may be able to prevent and solve its corruption problems efficiently. By contrast, the Lang Flat Ruampattana Community is a community with conflict and no collective power, like most communities in Bangkok. A comparison between these two communities could be very beneficial. The research team could analyze the findings and apply them to contextually different communities.

The research findings in the first phase will be concrete in the 2 trial areas mentioned above. It is necessary to have a participation process of the community committee, community members and various networks supporting anti-corruption such as the Bangkhen District community organization council, the Saiklongbangbua network, the Anti-Corruption Organization of Thailand, the mass media, the Office of Bangkok District, Office of Laksi District, National Anti-Corruption Commission, SIAM LAB, HAND Social Enterprise Co., Ltd, and Opendream Co., Ltd. Group activities such as activities for enhancing the participation process of preventing and solving corruption problems in the community, integrating good governance culture into the community way of life by giving priority to the next generation and activities for developing a supplementary mechanism to prevent and solve corruption problems are arranged so that the system and mechanism can be efficiently driven forward. Such activities can help establish the learning process and strengthen community participation. As a result, the community members can appreciate the benefits and value of the principles of good governance in reducing and preventing corruption in their respective communities. These activities will directly and indirectly affect the reduction of inequality and poverty. In addition, the communities and their members will be strong. Their strength is a major foundation for their attempt to build a sustainable “corruption-free community”.

1.2. Objectives

This research study’s objectives are as follows:

1. To examine problems, causes and factors that cause corruption as well as forms and channels of corruption for conducting the projects or activities in a community,

2. To design and apply a system and mechanism to prevent corruption by community participation, and

3. To empower a community to prevent and solve corruption problems in a community by adhering to the principles of good governance.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Research framework

The research team studied the concept and theories of good governance and community participation to apply to the study areas. The research team gives priority to learning about the context of each community, its form and group dynamics in order to gain knowledge and understanding about problems situation, causes and conditions leading to corruption, types and channels of corruption in the community. The team can use this knowledge to design a system and mechanism to prevent corruption by applying the principles of good governance so that the best way to establish a corruption-free community with community participation can be found as shown in a diagram below.
2.2 Areas of Study

- The Bangbua Community, Bangkhen, Bangkok
- The Lang Flat Ruampattana Community, Laksi, Bangkok

The research team selected the Bangbua Community and the Lang Flat Ruampattana Community as samples of areas in Bangkok. The strength of these communities stemmed from their ability to unite in order to deal with crises in their own areas. With regard to the Bangbua Community, the people and the community leader succeeded in striving for the Baan Mankong Program. The research team expected that a community with dynamic people and a strong community leader may be able to prevent and solve its corruption problems efficiently. By contrast, the Lang Flat Ruampattana Community is a community with conflict and no collective power, like most communities in Bangkok. A comparison between these two communities could be very beneficial. The research team could analyze the findings and apply them to contextually different communities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Methodology

For this research project, the research team applied a community – based research approach. The research team gave priority to the community members who were co-researchers in order that they could
get involved in the research process from the very beginning. The whole process required their understanding of their own community problems, their discovery of solutions to the problems based on sound rationalization, and their involvement in the actual research task and research summarization that led to solutions to community problems. This research study is considered Participatory Action Research (PAR), for it focuses on participation of community members. An overview of implementation guidelines is as follows:

1) The research team, the community committee and community members get involved in establishing and applying a system and mechanism to prevent corruption. Meetings are held frequently so that community consensus can be truly confirmed.

2) An in-depth interview with the people involved in community activity arrangement such as a community leader, community committee and community members is conducted after a system and mechanism application has been implemented so that they can share their perspectives/suggestions for a system and mechanism improvement.

3) A focus group consisting of a community leader, a community committee and community members is set up so that group members can exchange ideas about implementing a system and mechanism to prevent and solve corruption problems in the community

4) Group activities consisting of activities for enhancing the participation process of preventing and solving corruption problems in the community and activities for developing a supplementary mechanism to prevent and solve corruption problems are arranged. These activities are conducted for a group of people involving in solving problems, with emphasis on a group of young people, who are to experiment by using concrete tools to prevent and solve corruption problems in the community.

3.2. Definitions

“Empowerment” means the process of developing individual/community members by enabling them to realize the causes of problems in order to get ready to confront and find solutions to the problems.

“Community” refers to an area where people live together continuously as a group and share the same way of life (Regulation of Bangkok Metropolitan on Community and Community Committee B.E.2555)

Participation means having a stake in an organization or an official unit. Members of the public are “involved in recognizing existing problems and making important decisions in committee meetings through their representatives. An involvement of members of the public can be in any form at various levels, and the public must be informed”United Nations ESCAP, What is Good Governance?, www.unescap.org/pdd

Transparency International defines “corruption” as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2000)

According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), good governance is defined as “the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented or not implemented. Governance can be used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance” United Nations ESCAP, What is Good Governance? www.unescap.org/pdd

3.3. Theory and Literature Review
Theories and literature examined in this research study address 4 issues as follows: a system and mechanism for preventing and solving corruption problems in a community, the application of good governance for community management, community management by people participation, and the supporting process for dealing with anti-corruption efforts by community empowerment.

4. Findings and Discussion

According to the research study entitled “A System and Mechanism Application Process to Prevent Corruption by Community Participation: A Case Study of the Bangbua Community in the Bangkhen District and the Lang Flat Ruampattana Community in the Laksi District, Bangkok”, there were three findings:

4.1 Problems of corruption in the community

With regard to the context of the problems, causes, and factors causing corruption, and forms and channels of corruption for conducting the projects or activities in the communities, it is shown that both communities had to deal with similar forms and channels of corruption.

The primary forms of corruption found most frequently were as follows:

1. Embezzlement of community members’ money for personal expenses by using one’s own official position without a system of checks and balances in place,
2. Procurement corruption done by government officials in collusion with an entrepreneur,
3. The community committee’s breach of duty regarding working transparency, and
4. No clarification on the community’s income and expense account and on an account of donations from external agencies.

In addition, the secondary forms and channels of corruption found were as follows:

1. using the patronage and reciprocal system by giving the exercise of discretionary power in loan approval exclusively to the chairman of the village fund committee,
2. The government officials’ breach of duty by not following the rules as specified by the law,
3. No team work and no checks and balances in the form of a committee available,
4. The community committee’s intentional failure to clarify the community expenses due to the community members’ negligence gap, and
5. Corruption caused by the government officials’ breach of duty in failing to perform their inspection tasks.

4.2 A system and mechanism to prevent corruption by community participation

As a result of various forms and channels of corruption in the community, it is necessary to have a system and mechanism to prevent and solve problems of corruption by applying good governance principles of participation, transparency, rule of law and accountability to the community’s way of life. The mentioned system and mechanism can be concretely implemented as follows:
1. The community committee set up regulations of the community together by specifying that to have a quorum, more than half of the community committee members must be present.

2. The community committee must set up regulations of the community on disclosure of income and expense information on the community’s activities.

3. The community committee must establish the community’s accounting system showing the community’s income and expense in order that the community members can check it all the time.

4. The community committee must arrange the community’s disbursement forms and set rules for the community committee members responsible for signing the forms and documents.

5. The community committee must give community members an opportunity and encourage them to participate in the community’s activities from the beginning to the end of the projects.

6. The community committee must cooperate with the government agencies monitoring the communities in the form of checks and balances in order to have transparency and to abide by the regulations on the expenditure of the community’s budget.

4.3 The process of community empowerment to prevent and solve problems of corruption in communities must adhere to the principle of good governance.

With regard to empowering a community to get involved in a system and mechanism application process to prevent corruption in the Bangbua Community in Bangkhen District and the Lang Flat Ruamprattana Community in Laksi District, Bangkok, the research team found that the communities made use of the mentioned research findings to set up rules for mobilizing the cooperation between the community committee and members in their efforts to implement community participation efficiently as a mechanism to prevent corruption. The research team discussed with the community committee and members many times to establish familiarity between researchers, research assistants, community committee and community members. They all agreed to work on preventing corruption in their communities concretely. They identified 7 main issues in the process of driving communities toward the goal of becoming a corruption-free community as follows:

1) Community committee meetings

The Bangbua community holds meetings on the third Saturday of each month. The Lang Flat Ruamprattana community holds meetings on the second Saturday of each month. To have a quorum, more than half of the community committee members must be present. For example, the Bangbua community has 8 community committee members, at least 5 community committee members must be present to form a quorum. The Lang Flat Ruamprattana community has 7 community committee members. Therefore, at least 4 community committee members must be present. As for monthly community committee meetings, a clear meeting agenda should be available. It consists of a list of committee members attending the meeting, the chairman’s report, an approval of minutes of the previous meeting, matters for consideration, matters arising and any other business. After the meetings, the meeting records and meeting reports should be done. The process of selecting a committee member acting as chairman in case the chairman of community committee is absent and a resolution passed in the meeting by an absolute majority must be specified.

2) The community’s income and expense

The following practices are required: a bookkeeper doing the book keeping in a specified form, a responsible person appointed for the duty of disbursement, disclosure of monthly income and expense information by posting a notice or using other channels to inform the community members, being ready to give more detailed information on the communities’ expenditure if doubted by any community member, opening a bank account, and keeping evidence of receipt and payment. The community
committee must set up a ledger, a record of every community’s income and payment, summary of monthly income and expense including a balance available for use in the following month. Importantly, the community committee must issue a receipt as proof of income for supporting the community development or other financial support. A community committee member who receives an amount of money must give a signature and the day/month/year on a receipt and deliver the original receipt to a payer. All types of money that a community committee receives must be deposited in a government-owned bank or a commercial bank in the community’s name within the day of receiving or no later than the following day. There must be at least 3 responsible persons opening a bank account. In addition, at least 2 of the 3 community committee are responsible for disbursement. A community committee member who is a petty cash holder can hold petty cash not more than 3,000 baht per day. The community’s disbursement must be approved by more than half of the community committee.

3) Donations’ regulations

With regard to donations’ regulations, a responsible person appointed for receiving and dispensing donations must provide receipts as evidence of such activities, keep a donation account, and disclose information on donations. At least 2 or 3 community committee members responsible for receiving and dispensing donations must use a specified form. The community committee members receiving all the items must issue a receipt as proof of a donation, sign and write the day/month/year when a donation was received on a receipt and deliver the original receipt to a donor. The responsible persons make the community’s donation ledger and summary of monthly donations, disclose detailed information on donations to all community members. A list of monthly donations and distributions must be posted as a notice or publicized through other channels to inform community members. The community committee members responsible for donations must be ready to give more detailed information on all donations including monthly donations and distribution if any community members have any doubt.

4) Opportunity given to the community members participating in the community’s activities

All age groups of the community members, especially members of the young generation as successors continuing the community’s work, are given an opportunity to participate in the community’s activities from the beginning to the end of projects. The community committee must publicize through various channels at least 3 days in advance. The community committee must spread the word in different zones that they are responsible for and set a goal of the number of the community members participating in each activity. The number of community members should be higher next time. The community committee must take photos or videos of the people participating in the activities. Importantly, the community committee must do a summary report on activities or projects, the number of participants, and income and expense for conducting activities. In addition, the community committee must be willing to improve and develop the community’s activities as suggested by participants on the project’s evaluation form.

5) Communication and information disclosure to community members

In this regard, the community committee and the community members exchange ideas. The community committee must disclose detailed information on its community management through proper channels so that community members can access all information thoroughly. Moreover, there must be tools or equipment for receiving community members’ complaints and problems. The community committee must summarize different kinds of complaints and problems in order to show the trend of problems occurring in the community and find out ways to solve and prevent repeated problems. The
Community committee and community members should meet at least once in 3 months to exchange ideas and discuss problems in the community. To sustain community development and make the community committee and the community members self-reliant and united, the community committee must give priority to community members who have different opinions by talking officially and unofficially to build understanding and provide them more detailed information.

6) The process of enhancement for the anti-corruption endeavour in a community

To strengthen the community’s anti-corruption endeavour, the community committee must increase their knowledge and potential for working in accordance with the principle of good governance. The community members are requested to keep watching, examining and jointly giving praise and moral support to an informant who bravely exposes or gives information about corruption in the community. In the community committee meetings, the research team always emphasizes the importance of working in accordance with the principle of good governance. Honesty, participation, commitment, accountability and transparency must be the basic foundation of the community’s culture. The community committee jointly set up guidelines on watchfulness, attentiveness and inspection in their fight against corruption. Additionally, whistle-blowers or those who are brave enough to reveal corruption in the community are commended.

7) A working process to initiate participation of external networks

The community committee and community members working together with other communities, the District Office, the community networks and other related agencies can efficiently and effectively establish and implement a system and mechanism for preventing and solving corruption problems so as to create transparency in community management. In addition, the community committee must reflect on problems concerning the District Office’s spending rules and regulations that are inconsistent with a current situation and find a way to amend the mentioned rules and regulations to make them practicable.

In this regard, to empower a community to prevent and solve corruption problems in a community by adhering to the principle of good governance, the community committee gives an opportunity to all community members to participate in the community’s activities, especially members of the young generation as successors continuing the community committee’s work. The research team organizes group activities in different forms including educating and conducting study visits in the anti-corruption area to initiate an exchange of knowledge and experience that the community members can efficiently and sustainably apply to their own community.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

The aforementioned community empowerment plan for applying a system and mechanism to prevent and solve corruption problems is a practical process that can concretely create a corruption-free community. The community must use the process regularly and consistently until it becomes an inherent and stable part of the community’s way of life. In addition, to make the measures and mechanisms more efficient, the community may use an auditing system in the form of checks and balances carried out by external community networks to audit an income-expense account system set up by the community committee themselves. These kinds of practice can strengthen the community and make it free of corruption. A corruption-free community is a strong foundation for corruption-free society.
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